



LOVING
Decker

SOPHIA SUMMERS

LOVING DECKER

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CONTENTS

[Read all books by Sophia Summers](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter one, Coming Home to Maverick](#)

[Read all books by Sophia Summers](#)

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CHAPTER ONE

Faith Haws sat in her living room and listened to some rather fast talking. The man trying to get her to sell her land looked like her old friend from high school; every now and then Randall even acted like his old self. But for the most part, she really didn't recognize this person with the sales pitch and the fancy big numbers.

A big developer had been smart to hire a local favorite, Randall McKinney, to try and get a bunch of land sales and signatures by month's end. But suddenly his old friends had become an agenda item for him. She tried to cut him off at the first break in conversation. "Thanks for all that information, Randall. I appreciate you getting me in on the first wave." Whatever that meant. He was acting like if she signed now, she'd make more than if she signed after everyone else had agreed to develop the area.

"Faith, we have history. This is about friendship. I'm here for you. You know that." He flipped open to the last page. "Just a signature here, and I'll take care of the rest. This solves a lot of tough decisions for you right now." His eyes

spoke of caring. His voice sounded sincere. And she knew it was a great opportunity, financially.

"Thank you, Randall. Leave the papers. You can't make a decision like this overnight."

He nodded, his eyes kind but also hungry, and it was that tiny glint that made her hesitate. His arm draped across her shoulders and gave her a quick squeeze as they walked through her tiny living room to the front door. "I understand. There's still a window to take hold of this opportunity. I'll give you a call later this week. Once you sleep on it, if everything becomes clear, feel free to call me in the morning."

Her heart clenched. But she stepped forward, gently dislodging his friendly gesture, and opened her front door. "Thank you again. I appreciate you getting me in on this good deal." It was a godsend financially. She had to see it as that, didn't she? A blessing straight from heaven? How else could she pay for all the mountains of bills from the hospital?

Some of his words repeated in her mind as she watched him walk away. "If you sign, the others will follow. Everyone." He had tossed a packet on the table. "The Marshalls. The Hancocks. The Bellistons." He placed the larger stack on top of the ones he'd thrown. "Every family here said they're only signing if the Haws sign." What he didn't say was that the Dawsons would never sign.

She thought of their family, of Decker Dawson's open and easy grin, of all the good they'd done for Willow Creek over the years. Mayor Dawson had been a leading influence for good for almost a decade. She suspected if he were still

alive, this conversation would not be happening with any of them. Many had called him the father of Willow Creek. His son Decker... She sighed and closed the door behind Randall. Decker had been her crush—no, more than that—he was the man she compared all others to, the person she'd wanted to marry since he'd taken her to the Junior Prom as friends.

They'd always been just friends. He teased, bumped shoulders, high-fived her to death, but never anything more. The only thing tender she'd ever seen from him was the day he showed up on her porch right after her father had been admitted to the hospital for his first stroke. His strong arms had held her while she cried. And she'd hoped at that moment he would never let go.

As she fell into her father's favorite armchair in the front room, the weight of all of Willow Creek suddenly shifting onto her shoulders, she felt almost too tired to pray. Almost.

With a heaviness that should have been reserved for someone much older, she lowered herself to the floor, rested her wrists on the seat of the chair and opened her heart to God.

What am I gonna do?

That was the essence of her prayer. But the response was surprising.

The words from her morning Bible study came to her mind. *His hand is stretched out still.*

Her eyes blurred, and she rested her head on the seat. Great warmth washed through her with such a strength of love that she wished it would never leave. She basked in it, allowing the comfort to wash over her, taking away for a

moment the worry, the angst about the decisions she had to make. The ones in her mind right then had nothing to do with selling or not selling. They had to do with her grandpa. And she knew she had to head to the hospital.

Reluctantly leaving the sacred bubble of love in her prayer, she stood, but the feelings remained. So with a trembling smile, she wiped her eyes, splashed water on her face, and grabbed her purse and keys.

Grandpa had had a series of strokes, one after the other, until this last one left him mostly incoherent. There were times when she knew he saw her, his eyes smiling back understanding and love. Then they would glaze over, and she knew he was gone. But perhaps he could still hear her.

This morning she knew she had to talk to him.

The nurses smiled as she made her way to Grandpa's room. The blinds were up, and beautiful sunlight streamed in through the windows on the far wall.

Grandpa looked restful. The monitors beeped quietly, the comforting evidence of his vitals. And the room felt warm, the cozy kind of warm.

Faith had become used to the feel of a hospital room. It was scary at first. She used to wrinkle her nose at the smell. But she'd come to realize that sacred things happened in hospitals too. And she was looking for that today.

"Hey there, Grandpa."

She imagined she heard his response and saw his twinkly smile. "How's my Faith-girl?" His hand would reach out to hers, and she would run to his side, grasping it in both of hers.

The lack of visible response from Grandpa did not deter her.

She sat at his side and pulled his free hand, the one not attached to an IV, into her own. "Grandpa, it's good to see you."

His breathing continued as before. She had no indication that he was hearing her at all. But she pressed on; something urged her to speak. "The cows are up in the north pasture. They're about to be brought down. Hawkins thought the grass was greener and sweeter down in the valley, so he's bringing them down with his own herd. The hay is growing and the air is sweet. Did you ever notice how sweet the air is? There's nothing in the world like the smells in Willow Creek. The soil right after it has been turned." She smiled. She could almost smell the rich earthy aroma. "That's one of my favorites."

His hand twitched.

She gulped. And kept talking. "But this new sweetness. It's something I never noticed before. It's like sugar. And it fills the air. Who knew that hay was sweet." She laughed. "Until you breathe too deeply when the wind shifts, and the horse barn gets you."

His hand twitched again.

"And being your granddaughter, I'm determined to try and like that smell, but hmm...it's pretty sour, isn't it?"

His hand squeezed her own, the briefest pressure, but it was intentional. And she knew it.

"A lot of people love that horse smell, so you're in good company." She smiled. Was he hearing her? She pressed on, desperate to share her burden. "But the biggest thing I

want to talk about is Randall. He wants me to sell." She breathed out every last bit of breath and watched her grandpa. "He says the whole town is selling if we do, except the Dawsons. He says it's the chance of a lifetime with a high paying developer."

He didn't move. He didn't say anything. His hand did not squeeze in response. Nothing.

Her lungs felt tight, her head longed for air. With her intake of breath, she tried to fight tears of disappointment. But they came. What was she expecting? That he'd suddenly awake from this coma and tell her the answers to her problems?

She sighed. Why had she felt so compelled to come? "I'm just not sure what to do. I love this town. I love our land. I know the stories. The first Haws came over from England and bought one thousand acres of prime soil in Willow Creek. Jed Haws, George Dawson, and the others, they settled this land and created this town. I know, Grandpa." She closed her eyes. "But I'm alone now. And I don't have any money."

With his hand still in her own, she gazed out the window. She tried not to think about the fact that every precious heartbeat monitored on the hospital machines was costing more than they could afford to pay.

Randall's offer had come exactly at the right time. Hadn't it?

Then why wasn't she jumping at the chance?

His hand is stretched out still. What a comforting response. But not really a direction. She tried to grasp onto the patience that was required. No matter what happened,

she knew God was with her. The warmth from her prayer still lingered. She reached for those feelings, hoping to cling forever to the love she knew was always there.

But she still needed to make a decision.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. She assumed it was a nurse, so she turned slowly, watching a patch of birds dive down and land in a tree outside the window.

When no one entered the room, she lifted her gaze toward the doorway and almost jumped to her feet. "Decker?" Man, he always looked great. Today he was newly shaved where he sometimes let his scruff linger along his jawline. His shirt was tucked in. His shoulders as broad as ever. He basically filled the doorway.

"Hey there, Faithy Haws."

She smiled. He always called her that. She loved it. His voice rumbled through her in happy waves. "Hey, Deck. Whatcha doing here?"

He stepped in. "Well, I just wanted to visit my favorite grandpa."

"You did?" She swallowed, some really strong emotions making it impossible to speak.

"Yeah, it's a good place to think."

She nodded. "Do you...come often?"

He shrugged and grabbed the back of a chair. "Mind if I sit down?"

"No, go right ahead."

He sat across from her on the other side of Grandpa's bed. "He looks so peaceful."

She nodded, not sure what to think about this visit—about anything really. Her mind had completely ceased to function.

Then, after a few more seconds of silence, he sighed. “Mav wants to sell.”

She squeezed her grandfather’s hand like it would give her sustenance. Maverick Dawson was thinking of selling! She couldn’t think of anything more shocking.

“He said we can sell off the upper pasture land and keep what’s closer to the house and still have a working ranch, but that we would never make what they’re offering, not in another decade of crops and cattle, if we keep it. The money is worth way more to us than the land at this point.” Decker cleared his throat. “At least that’s what Mav says.” Decker wasn’t looking at her. He was watching her grandpa.

After a moment, he shrugged. “And here I am, hoping your grandpa will tell me what to do.” He laughed and then turned to her. His eyes held so many questions, and for another second she didn’t know what to say. The great, strong Decker who always had all the answers was not sure how to proceed?

“What are you gonna do?”

He sat back in his chair, drumming his thumbs against his thighs. “I don’t know.”

“Randall left the paperwork on my kitchen table.”

Decker grew very still, watching her. Then he shook his head. “You can’t.”

Something about his tone, half desperation, half demanding, sat wrong with her. “Why not?”

"Because you're the Haws."

"And you're the Dawsons."

"Well, if you cave, then we might as well give up on Willow Creek altogether."

"I could say the same about you and your family. That's unfair, Decker, and you know it." Did she have to point out that they were sitting with her grandpa? That she was the only Haws left in all of Willow Creek? That she was hanging on with every scrap of desperation left to her? And it wasn't enough.

"But if we go down, and you go down, what will Willow Creek be?"

She looked away. Deflated again. What little strength her indignation had granted her fizzled out.

He reached across Grandpa and rested a hand on hers that still cradled her dear grandfather's. "I'm sorry."

She met eyes that were filled with compassion, and it brought out the tears waiting to fall. But she didn't look away. "I was hoping Grandpa would tell me what to do, too."

He nodded. And they sat like that for a long time, Decker leaning across Grandpa's lap, their hands all in an intertwined pile.

CHAPTER TWO

Decker could have kicked himself for getting after Faith. Like the woman didn't have enough to worry about. But he really had been hoping for some answers. He'd wanted Faith to give him the strength to go up against Mav and his crazy idea to sell. Instead, she'd sounded like she might agree with his brother.

He had been out on the highway, running to Tractor Supply for some parts, and all of a sudden he just knew he had to go to the hospital. Right then. He'd hoped that God was showing him a path, some sort of sign. Mav had asked everyone in the family to report back with an answer—to sell or not to sell—and if the answer was no sale, then they needed to think up some solutions. 'Cause the ranch wouldn't make enough to support itself forever.

Their sponsorships brought in money. Their wins brought in money. The rodeo was a good source of celebrity and income, but they couldn't ride forever. Mav could see the writing on the wall that he so blatantly pointed out to each of them. The Dawson Ranch was going under unless they thought of other ways to bring in an income. Did the

place belong to the grandchildren and their children after? He knew his father would have said yes. His mother had remained strangely quiet. Another thing that Decker would have to go and investigate. How did Mama feel about all this, really?

But he'd put all that pressure on Faith, pressure he knew belonged on his own shoulders, plain and simple. The fate of Willow Creek did not rest with her alone.

And here they were, basically holding hands with her dying grandpa. Would the man have sold out? He studied his peaceful face, and he knew he wouldn't have ten years ago. But now? Things were different now.

He squeezed her hand. "You wanna go get something to eat?"

Her sad, desperate eyes lifted into a smile, the switch to hope and light so beautifying her face that, for a moment, he was stunned. His Faithy was one beautiful woman. And he'd never really considered her that way before. He stood. "Grandpa, do you mind if I go take care of your granddaughter for a bit?"

He imagined the man's smile and gentle wink. Then he turned to Faith. "I miss him."

"Yeah, me too."

He held out his hand, and as he clasped her fingers in a typically friendly gesture, it felt different. She felt more tender. And he felt more protective. Something about her changed in his mind. He didn't know what. But for now he knew he needed to make up for the added pressure he had just dumped on her. He wanted more than anything to take it all back to rest on his own shoulders.

They didn't say much as they left the hospital together.

He held the door open for her to climb in his truck.
"We'll come back for yours."

She nodded.

When he closed it, enclosing her inside, he wanted to carefully cradle her presence, her closeness. He wanted to take care of the woman. He patted the roof of his truck and then moved around to the other side.

He started the heat and then thought better of it. It might get warm. "Please adjust this to however you like it." Then he turned on the music, but it wasn't right. No good music on. So he turned it off.

He put his hand on the gearshift and hesitated. Then he turned to her.

She laughed.

"What?"

"Why are you so nervous?" she asked.

"I'm not...I don't know."

"Put on some country, roll down the windows, and let's get out of here."

He laughed at the humor in her face, and the old habits from high school lessened some of his adult burdens. "All right. You got it." He cranked up some Garth Brooks that just happened to be on, lowered the windows, opened the sun roof, and peeled out in the gravel at the edge of the parking lot.

She laughed. "Now that's more like it."

"I'm sure the hospital staff heard that all the way up on your grandpa's floor."

"If they did, they're smiling. Now, let's get ourselves a burger at Sam's before I pass out from hunger."

"Do you think Judy is working?" he asked.

"Of course."

The thought that one day she might not be there had never really occurred to him, but now with things changing, he realized Judy was probably hoping to retire.

The whole town was hoping to retire. Was that what Willow Creek had become? A bunch of people living for the decade before with nothing to look forward to?

He shook his head. "You know, I'm supposed to be an adult now. I'm supposed to know things and...decide things. And I just realized, I'm not cut out for this." He laughed. But he really hoped she'd understand what he was trying to say. "Do you ever wake up and realize that you're the adult in the room now?"

"Oh yeah. I do. Every single day." Her face held pain, and again he was reminded of all the things that rested on her shoulders. So much. And he'd added more.

"But hey, let's be adults together. You're not alone in this. And Judy's shakes always make everything better."

She sighed and leaned her head back, but her expression was full of gratitude. "Thanks, Deck. I just really don't know what I'm gonna do."

He turned onto the main road that would take them into town. "At least we know God's hand is always there."

She turned to him, her eyes widening. "What did you say?"

"God's hand. He's always reaching out. He's embracing, loving, helping, no matter what." He shrugged. "Though

sometimes I don't see him or understand just what he's doing." That last mumble was meant more for himself, but of course she heard him.

"I totally get that." Her small smile was satisfied and looked as though she held a secret. But she didn't share, and he didn't press her. He just couldn't understand why he'd felt so compelled to go see Grandpa Haws, unless he'd been directed to find his old friend. Maybe the two of them could figure something out.

When they walked through the door to the cheerful burger place, Judy's smile grew to fill her face. "Is that Decker Dawson? And Faith Haws? Oh, my whole day is made, darlings! You just come right in here. There's a booth open over there; I'll get your drinks ready."

As soon as they were seated, Decker whispered, "Do you think she remembers our favorite drinks?"

Judy showed up that moment with two huge soft drinks. "Diet Coke for Miss Faith and a Dr. Pepper for you, Deck." She winked and then waited.

"You're amazing." Faith took a deep drink. "Oh, and you remembered the cherry." She grinned up at Judy, and for a second, Decker saw middle school and high school Faith in her eyes.

"Yes, I did. A hint, just like you like it."

"Mm-hmm."

Judy's hair was now completely white. She kept it short. Her cheeks were a bit rosy and her eyes smiling. "How's that grandpa of yours?"

"Oh, he's just still there. Sometimes I know he hears me, and other times, I just don't know where he is."

"Probably reliving a wonderful life. That man was an angel to so many. Do you know how often he kept those vultures out of this town? He saved my little diner so many times by refusing to sell out. We owe a lot to that man."

Faith smiled and looked brave, but Decker swallowed an uncomfortable amount of guilt on her behalf.

They ordered their burger of preference, and as soon as Judy walked away, Decker leaned across the table and reached for her hand again. "I am so sorry. I wish I could take back all that pressure I heaped on top of you."

"No, it's good you said what you did. I've been wondering for days now what you think about all this."

"You have?"

"Of course."

"Why didn't you call?"

She shrugged and took a long swig. "I don't know, Deck, why didn't you call?"

His nod started slow but then sped up. "I think I need to fix that. I'll make sure you hear from me more."

Her cheeks colored a slight pink, and he studied her face. Was she feeling different around him too? "What are you doing Sunday?"

"If you're inviting me to Dawson family dinner, then I'm doing nothing except for that." She grinned.

"Then I'll tell Mama to add another plate."

"Yes!" She raised her cup to him and then sat back, looking around. "This is nice."

The place was decorated the exact same as it always had been, with pictures of people from the town. There were plenty from their days in high school. Mav and Bailey, Dylan

and Shelby. Deck cringed, so happy his twin had married Kate instead. He and Faith had quite a few up on the walls, too. He'd never really dated anyone, but he'd hung out enough with Faith that they were known as friends if not more. He'd always laughed and denied it when people asked if they were dating. They had been "only friends" for a long time. And that's what it had always felt like.

But as Mama had said, sometimes friends made the best girlfriends when the time was right. Is that what was happening here?

He watched Faith while she laughed about this memory or that. She waved her hands, animated. Her face lit with joy. Even with all that she was carrying right now, she was full of some kind of peace and happiness that he needed more of.

His hand is stretched out still.

He'd read that powerful phrase this morning in his Bible study, and it wouldn't leave his mind. God reached out His hand even when they made mistakes, when they did dumb things, basically all the time, no matter what, God stretched his hand out to them. In times of happiness, worry, stress, He was always there.

As he thought about Willow Creek and the developers closing in and everyone needing to sell off land, he just didn't know where God's hand was in any of this. But he had hope.

"You're quiet." Faith's voice was soft, tentative, and Decker could have kicked himself because he'd made her worried. "I'm sorry. I'm thinking deep things. I just don't

know what to do about all this, and I'm not even sure what the right thing is."

"Is there a right thing?"

"I don't know that either." Decker shook his head. "But I am glad I ran into you today. That felt important." He smiled, letting his eyes travel over her sweet face. She was so beautiful. How had he never really appreciated that before now? "I decided a very important thing."

"Oh?"

"If I don't know about the land and Willow Creek or how to answer Mav or what to do with my life if the Dawson ranch is no more...but I do know one thing."

"What's that?"

The world slowed around them. Faith's expression, open and hopeful, filled him with so many emotions. He wanted her to understand. He wanted to take things in a new direction. "I know I'd like to see you more."

"You would?"

"Yep. A whole lot more."

She couldn't hide her pleased smile or the warm blush to her cheeks. Could she really be interested? After all this time? Or maybe things were changing for her now, too. But then she crossed her arms. "We'll just have to see, now won't we, Decker Dawson? How about we start with dinner."

"You're on. And then lunch the next day."

She opened her mouth and then nodded. "And lunch."

When their food arrived, it kept them quiet for a bit as he enjoyed every bite of Sam's signature burger. "Wow, Judy's good at these."

"I know. I don't eat here enough."

When they had only a few fries left, which Faith casually dipped in her shake now and then, he knew it was time to switch back to tougher subjects. "What do you think I should tell Mav?"

She exhaled for a long time before she lifted her eyes to see his face.

Again he was struck by her, this time by the depth he saw in her expression, by her caring. She tossed the last fry back on her plate. "I don't know. It's the same as the answer to my own question. What should I tell Randall?" She leaned forward. "And what I don't know is why this is all on our heads. Why do you have to decide the fate of Willow Creek? Why do I? We both know that if the bulk of our land were to go to developers, the whole town would change."

She was right. It felt like a burden they'd always borne. The original settlers had made most of the decisions for this town. But it didn't have to be that way. "Why are we burdened with something that everyone should be able to chime in on?" He smiled, hoping this was a good idea instead of a terrible one. "Why don't we call a meeting and let everyone talk it through?"

"Everyone?"

"Yeah, like all the original landholders, or all the landholders above 25 acres. More voices has to be a good thing here, more ideas."

"Or more fights." She winced. "Do you really think we should open up that can of worms?"

"Sure. I'll mention it to Mav. I think it would have to come from the Dawsons and the Haws. If we called a meeting together, I'm willing to bet everyone would come." He liked the idea more and more.

Faith did not look convinced, but she nodded. "I trust you. But we have to move quickly. I think Randall is trying to avoid meetings like this; he's pushing for an early response. I guess some of us are getting better deals than others."

Decker frowned and shook his head. "Which is how he keeps us divided. Nope. I think this is a full town decision."

"If you say so." She smiled. "It is nice to know I'm not alone. I can't tell you how good that feels."

"You should have never felt alone. We've been friends since third grade. I'm sorry I wasn't here for you."

"Life gets busy. I've been distracted too. And we don't always have time for childhood friends."

He studied her, and he knew he wanted a new definition of what they could be, but now was not the time. "Hey, at least you're coming for dinner."

They continued more lighthearted conversation. He tried to make her laugh. And every time a smile lit her face, he was gratified. And every time, he wished he could push the conversation in a different direction. When they'd watched the other customers come and go twice, they finally picked up their mess and made their way to the door.

"Deck, this is exactly what I needed. I'm not sure how you knew, but today was the perfect day to see you." She sighed. The burdens she bore were more visible all of a sudden.

“You’re looking at the new Deck where you’re concerned. I’m here. Every day, any time.”

He opened the door to his truck.

She stepped by him to climb in. Was she closer than she needed to be? Did she pause for a minute right in front of him? Her murmured, “thank you,” was way more subdued than the usual Faith.

Everything about the two of them was outside their norm.

But he could work with a new norm, especially if it included Faith and him spending more time together.

CHAPTER THREE

Decker held the door, and when she walked past, his soap, his clean shirt, even the smell of his shampoo washed over her, and she smiled. She might never get over this man. And here he was, being all nice to her, paying attention, and being surprisingly supportive of her tough position and opportunity to sell. She didn't think in a million years that Decker Dawson would have anything but fighting words for a person who would sell out to developers.

They walked together down the sidewalk of Willow Creek's main street. "This really is a charming place."

He pointed up ahead. "Doug Johnson, he's been cutting hair at that barber shop since I was a kid."

She laughed. "Every man in this town gets their hair cut by Doug, or their wives take to them with clippers."

Decker laughed. "None of his sons seem inclined to continue the family business."

"No, they don't, do they?" Every one of them had gone to college and left Willow Creek. "And Mabel's? Who's gonna make the town's donuts when she finally decides she can

retire?" She pointed to the best baker she'd ever been to. Nothing was as good as Mabel's.

"Oh, that will be a sad day when I can't pop in for one of her maple bars."

"Or the sugar. I just love the ones coated in sugar." She laughed. "I sound like I'm ten."

"But it's true. They're good. I've never had a better donut."

"Your mom sells her berry pies in there, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, when she's not at the fair."

They walked all the way to the corner, to the feedstore. "Isn't that your Mom right there, and Grace?"

Mama Dawson had her back to them, but Grace waved. "Deck!"

When Mama turned, her face lit. "Is that Faithy Haws?"

Faith had to giggle. It was the only response to such joy written all over Mama Dawson's face. "Hey there, Mrs. Dawson."

They approached, and before Faith could do anything else, Mrs. Dawson had her in a warm, soft embrace. "I've missed you. How come we don't see you on Sundays anymore?"

"Oh, I fixed that already." Decker leaned in and kissed his mom on the cheek. "She's coming this week."

"That's a good choice, son. We will do all our catching up then, but tell me, how is your grandpa. He might not see the flowers I bring, but they're the ones that grow all over the hillside. It will take him right out there on the land I know he loves so much." Her eyes were warm and full of caring.

Faith tried not to tear up, but her gesture was just so perfect she couldn't help but feel the warmth rise up inside like a beautiful sermon on Sunday. "You are one special lady, Mrs. Dawson." Faith impulsively kissed her on the cheek. "I'm sure he can smell them if he can't see them." She hoped so. Faith hoped she'd be able to see her grandpa's eyes opened again.

But that squeeze of his fingers. She wiped at her eyes. That was special. "He likes to think about the smells of things." She might have to be satisfied with only that.

Mrs. Dawson patted Decker on the arm. "This boy. He's my softy. Did you know? Of all the boys, Decker used to be the one to cry about selling off the calves or the baby pigs."

His face immediately turned red, and Faith couldn't help but be equally charmed and amused. "Aw, that's the cutest thing I've ever heard."

"I'm glad I've amused and charmed you all with my inner sensitivity."

"It's darling. And I'd be shocked at a young boy who didn't feel sad when he learned what happens to the animals." She clucked. "I've cried plenty. When they sent my Belle to the butcher, I didn't think I'd ever get over it."

Grace shook her head. "All you had to do was name it after a family member." She laughed. "Here, Nash! Come here, Nashy boy!"

Decker shook his head. "Oh, don't even get me started with that spoilt pig."

Grace just laughed. "Nash is the best thing that ever happened to our family, and you know it."

"He's an overstuffed, spoilt waste of space in the barn." Decker would have said more—he obviously had feelings about Nash the pig—but Mrs. Dawson was having none of it.

"Decker." Mrs. Dawson shook her head. "He is not. And as long as our Gracie here loves that animal, he will have an honored place in my barn."

"Nash, the pig?" The youngest brother had a pig named after him. She laughed. "That's something."

"Yeah, Nash eats it up."

Grace linked her arm with Faith's. "Are you really coming for dinner?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good! I need someone to talk to."

"You do?" Deck leaned in to smile into her face with an exaggerated wiggle of his eyebrows. "What's wrong with your uncle Decker, I'd like to know?"

"Nothing's wrong. You're just..." Grace turned a pretty shade of pink.

"Oh, you stop, Deck. Sometimes girls need to talk about girl stuff, and that's just how it is." Faith pulled Grace closer. "Am I right?"

Grace looked relieved and nodded.

Faith hoped she was alright. She had her mom and a couple aunts plus an amazing grandma to talk to. It seemed a bit concerning that she was reaching out to Faith, but she would do anything for the sweet girl, for any Dawson, really.

"I'll be there, girly, and we can cozy up somewhere to chat."

Decker groaned. "Am I gonna get to talk to you at all?"

"Maybe." Faith smiled. "We could go for a ride."

His eyes lit. "I'd like that. Let's go check out the fence line."

"Done."

They used to do that together. It was a chore that somehow fell on them both, and since their properties abutted for a large amount of the acreage, they rode together.

The thought of being out on the land with Deck at her side again made her smile.

"Well, don't let us keep you. You two go on. And I'll be seeing you Sunday, dear." Mama Dawson's smile felt like another hug.

"See you then." Faith felt Dawson's fingers lace with hers again. This was a lot of hand holding for one day. She and Dawson had held hands before. She had been thrilled every time, but for him it just seemed to feel friendly, and he'd never tried to progress into anything else. But this time it felt more insistent, more like he was seeking out her touch. And she liked it.

But was she going to go falling head over heels on the hope that his feelings for her had finally progressed? She was not. She didn't have time or emotional energy to explore that right now. And she knew she couldn't take the subtle rejection she would receive if he still didn't see her as anything other than a friend.

So, right now, she commanded herself to feel only friendly things about his hand warmly encasing hers, about the strength of his fingers, about the solid reassurance that his presence at her side gave. She tried. And failed.

But what she felt was interesting. And confusing. A return of that beautiful warmth and a reminder. *His hand is stretched out still*. The Lord's hand, not Decker's hand, she reminded herself. But then she couldn't help but wonder if Decker had been sent to her in the hospital as a blessing, or rather, she'd been encouraged to go to the hospital so she would see him there.

Meeting him there definitely did not seem like a coincidence.

So maybe she should just move forward with whatever this was and see it as something God was trying to tell her, or show her.

His eyes turned to hers, full of light and happiness and caring, and she wondered if this was just one way God was trying to make her happy. A happy little blessing during a tough time.

"What is it?" He slowed their steps.

"Nothing."

"You're really thinking hard over there. You haven't said a single thing for too many steps."

She sighed. "Mostly really good thoughts."

"But there's quite a bit to worry over, too."

"Well, yeah."

He squeezed her hand, and she felt happy bubbles bouncing around inside. And then holding his hand didn't feel like enough. She wanted those arms around her giving what she knew to be the best kind of big man hug in the world. She would get lost in his chest and feel the strength of him all around her. She needed one of those. And she needed it bad.

How long had she been on her own? How long had she been telling herself she was fine? But now, knowing a hug like Decker's was in reach, she knew she was not fine. A hug would be really nice.

But hadn't she just gone to sit at her grandpa's side, looking for answers she knew he couldn't speak?

"Uh, Faithy?"

She turned to him. "I'm sorry. Honestly, my mind is racing. I don't even know what to say before another thing pops in there."

"I'm just glad I saw you today."

"Yeah, I'm happy to not be alone in this."

They arrived back in front of his truck. His warm eyes pulled her in. She was a puddle, and he didn't even know it.

"Would it be weird to ask to give you a hug?" His almost shy offer confirmed her puddle status.

Her mouth dropped, and she stepped into his arms without another word. "How did you know this is exactly what I need?"

He pulled her as close as she would go and wrapped his strength around her, resting his chin on her head. And she decided she'd never felt anything so wonderful in her life. Her hands pressed into his back, and even though it wasn't possible to be closer, she wished she could. Everything in her world was Decker right now. His awesome smell of clean shirt and leather. His strength holding her up, his solid chest at the side of her face.

His mouth pressed into her hair.

Had he kissed her? Was that a friendly kiss? A brotherly kiss, or something more? She didn't want to look up into his

face to find out. 'Cause then her hug would end.

And now that she'd felt such a delicious relief, she didn't want to let it go, ever.

"Faith."

"Mm?"

"I should hug you more often."

She nodded, and tears welled in her eyes, but she didn't stop, she didn't move. She knew it was dragging on, but she didn't even care.

His hands moved up and down her back, and he kissed the top of her head again. This time there was no mistaking it. "I'm sorry." His voice held all kinds of compassion.

She nodded again and then looked up. "You've got nothing to be sorry for, but if you're just saying, 'This is the worst,' then thank you. It is. But having you here is helping." She sniffed and then stepped back, suddenly realizing how absolutely desperate she was sounding. She needed to get a grip. And she could. She did this every day. One good hug with the amazing Decker was not going to turn her into a weak puddle. She wouldn't allow it. "Wow, anyway, thanks for the hug." She wiped her face and reached for the truck door.

"I'll get that." He reached around her, and the space magnetized. She fought every impulse to lean into him again and climbed up inside as soon as the door was opened enough.

Why did she feel like she had to run? Because she was certain he would if he knew how desperately she was wanting more of his hugs, more of him, more of everything.

He had hit just the right time to suddenly be in her life again, full of compassion and caring and hugging.

She used the bottom of her shirt to wipe the rest of the moisture from her face and glanced in the visor mirror. She'd looked better, but not too bad considering.

By the time he climbed in the driver's seat, she'd pasted on a mostly sincere and semi-comfortable smile. "Hey, sorry about that."

He reached for her hand again. "That's what friends are for."

A part of her wilted and then relaxed with those words. But she was grateful that once again the pressure was off with Decker. "Well, thanks anyway, I guess I should get back."

"I figured as much. But thanks for grabbing burgers with me. This was good. Turns out I needed some time with Faithy Haws."

"Me too. Time with you, anyway. It was good." She couldn't even control what came out of her mouth. It was time to get back to her car. She forced her mouth to close and say nothing more.

They drove in the quiet for a moment, and then he turned on the radio. Country. And Bailey Dawson came on.

"What! I haven't heard her on here in forever!" Faith turned it up. Bailey had grown up in Willow Creek. And then she'd married Maverick. Their history was a little more complicated than that, but the town was quick to forgive, and Grace was their daughter, who Faith just adored. She sang along. "I miss her on the radio."

“Yeah, I don’t think she’ll be producing more any time soon. I know she’s always working on a song, but she’s pregnant again, and with the bunch she’s already got running around and wreaking havoc, she says that recording isn’t in the cards right now. But she seems happy.”

When the song ended, Bailey’s voice spoke. Faith turned it up louder.

“That was a shout-out to my favorite place in the world, Willow Creek. When I was lost, when I had nowhere else to turn, when I knew I had hurt a lot of people in this town, everyone welcomed me back.” Her voice broke, and Faith’s eyes filled with tears again. “And I’ll love them forever for that. They taught me what I should have known from the beginning. Grace comes in all shapes and sizes. And when your own neighbors offer you some, it’s one sweet package.”

Faith nodded.

“She’s one class act.”

“She sure is.”

They pulled up to her truck, and Faith’s mind was full of all kinds of ideas about grace and the town and what she should do. When Decker came around to open her door, she hopped down. He was so close, and the rush that flowed through her was almost too much, but she high-fived him and scooted around his large body before hopping up in her own truck and driving away.

“Well done, Faithy.” That was no small feat. But she had a lot of practice resisting her cravings for that tall cowboy. She’d done it for years, and she could do it again.

The rearview mirror showed a picture-perfect view of him, leaning up against his truck, watching her drive away.

The beating of her heart was ready to call her a liar, but she kept telling herself she'd be fine.

CHAPTER FOUR

Faithy Haws was one beautiful woman.

Decker hefted the next bale of hay and chucked it up onto the higher loft. His muscles strained, sweat dripped down his chest. And it felt good. Being asked to sell his family's land and all of a sudden realizing his longtime friend was a smoking hot faith-filled wonder tied up in a package just like he'd always wanted in a woman, not to mention getting offers to work out in New York, was messing with him. And he needed to work, hard. 'Cause what was wrong with Faithy being beautiful all of a sudden?

Nothing.

But he was still unsettled.

He reached for the next bale, feeling the strain as he swung it up into the air and onto the upper ledge next to the previous one. Must. Figure. This. Out. He wiped his forehead.

Mama came out with a glass of lemonade.

"Oh, you're an angel." He reached for his towel and wiped his face and head. "Thank you."

She smiled, but there was no getting away from the searching expression in her eyes.

He knew she wanted answers. She knew he was struggling. But he didn't know what to tell her. Because he didn't know what the problem was.

Then Nash stepped into the barn. "What's eating you?"

Decker laughed. Hand it to his brother to just get right to it. "I need a workout."

Nash crossed his arms over his chest.

But Decker ignored him. He didn't have anything to say. "Thanks for the lemonade, Mama." He handed her back the glass. "I'll just get the rest of the stack up there and organized, and then I'll be in. We can go over the books like we talked about." Mama wanted to understand what had been going on with the finances over the last few years. She had some specific questions, and he'd offered to show her.

Nash pulled off his shirt and put on a pair of gloves.

"You're blinding me."

He reached for the next bale.

After a minute, working side by side, Nash grunted. "You gonna make me do this all afternoon before you start talking?"

Deck laughed again. "Dude, you don't have to help. This feels good. I need it." But he took pity on his brother. "I don't know if we should sell. I don't know what to do about New York. And Faithy is beautiful all of a sudden." There. That was all of it.

Nash grunted as he threw the next bale up. He had to hand it to them. The Dawson brothers were strong. Nash was more wiry than the others, but the way he chucked hay

around like it was nothing told Deck not to underestimate his youngest brother.

Nash reached for the next bale. "Glad you finally have eyes for Faith. Every guy in Willow Creek has wanted to date that woman."

Thinking about anyone trying to get close with Faith suddenly sent his blood simmering. "Why didn't they?"

Nash shook his head. "Cause you two were a thing."

"We weren't."

"Not really. You never said anything. You never took it to the next level. But everyone in town knew you were together, or should have been."

Decker froze for a moment. People had stayed away from Faith because of him? A part of him, the jealous present-day Decker wanted to say, "Good, they should back off." But then the more reasonable side, the man who knew he hadn't been pursuing her all these years, felt like a bit of a dufus for not seeing what was so obvious to everyone else. "So I've been an idiot?"

"Nah. Just maybe blind."

He nodded. Couldn't argue with that. A man would have to be blind to not see how special Faith was. He threw the next hay up high enough that it landed on top of another bale in the loft.

"Good shot." Nash nodded.

"But she's not into me." With those words, Deck realized one of the sources of his itch to be out here straining his muscles. What if he pursued Faith and she turned him down? They'd been friends for years. She totally could have

said or done something before now if she was interested. That sort of proved she wasn't.

Nash snorted.

"What?"

"Nothing. I just never knew my big brother was afraid of a little rejection."

Decker clenched his fists. "Why you trying to egg me on?"

Nash grinned. "Cool down, brother. I'm just trying to light a little fire where it belongs."

Decker frowned. "I'm not sure I like you lighting fires. Maybe you should be thinking more about your own love life." If Nash dated, they didn't know about it. He was tightlipped and alone from what they all could tell.

"Whoa, brother." Nash held up his hands. "All I'm saying is, you're not gonna know how she feels until you try to date her and see." He watched the next bale soar up to the loft. "So what if she turns you down? You're not gonna lose her."

But he could. Deck knew he could lose her friendship and respect if he made a move when she wasn't ready.

Decker was done talking about this with Nash. "What are you gonna say to Mav about selling?"

"I don't know."

"Faith and I think we should call a town meeting and have everyone talk about it together."

His brother didn't say anything for long enough that Decker stopped working and turned to look at him.

Nash shrugged. "You think that's a good idea?"

"I do. I think we should be talking about it. The fate of the town shouldn't rest on one person, or family, or even a

few.”

“That you talking or your concern for the lady on the abutting property?”

Decker pressed his lips together but then relaxed. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. But I don’t know what the difference is, me or her. We’re all in the same situation, aren’t we?”

Nash wiped his forehead. “Hers is a bit more desperate than ours. But besides that, consider the town. What if they say they don’t think we should all sell. Are they gonna pay our expenses then? They gonna pool all the money? They gonna convince all the good shopkeepers to stick around while the rest of us get old? This town might be dying right before our eyes.”

Decker hated to hear every word out of his brother’s mouth. “So you’re gonna tell Mav to sell?”

Nash shook his head. “I still don’t know.”

“Wish we could ask Dad.”

“Yep.” Nash threw the last bale. “Well, that was fun.”

Decker laughed and then approached his brother. “Thanks, man.”

“You’re all right.” Nash pushed at him. “But don’t bring your smells too close.”

“Hey, nothing wrong with a little bit of sweat, right? Isn’t that what someone used to say?”

“No one in our house.” Mama had always insisted that they wash up.

“I’m gonna talk to Mav about the town meeting.” Decker had half a mind to call a meeting even if his brothers didn’t think it was a good idea. They hadn’t been there when he

was talking to Faith. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

"So I should get ready for some real arm wrestling?" Nash laughed.

"Or something. But Faith is coming to dinner."

"Ah, so best behavior." Nash grinned.

"I'm not sure why you're smiling like you are."

"Just happy for you, brother. She's one of the best this town has to offer. A Dawson marrying a Haws. I don't think our dads could have arranged it any better."

Decker almost started complaining about jumping to conclusions, but who knew what could happen between them. They'd certainly known each other long enough to know all there was to know.

Maybe their feelings could grow. Maybe he could win her over. All the maybes.

When Nash went back to the house and Decker climbed up into the loft to move the hay around, he faced the other thing that was itching to be managed.

Two huge accounting firms had been talking to him. And he'd been approached by another group wanting to start their own venture. A part of Deck wanted to go, to leave Willow Creek for his brothers to manage, and start a life out there. He'd studied business. He'd worked as the Dawson Ranch accountant for years. Things were falling together for him to do the things he'd always wanted to.

But the timing seemed odd. In many ways moving to New York was exactly what he'd always wanted. And the job offers had come at just the right time. It would be a wonderful thing if one of the brothers brought in some kind

of outside income unrelated to rodeo or cattle or hay. And he was the one to do it.

At the same time, the town needed him. He'd just reconnected with Faith, and the family had some pressing decisions to make. Was it fair for him to take off? Yes, he would be making additional income. But then what about Faith? And if the opportunity was so perfect, why couldn't he feel at peace about any of it?

He lugged the huge bales around some more, mostly just to get his muscles aching. But by the time he was finished, the loft had never looked so great. Stacks of hay all the way to the back in nice, neat rows felt particularly satisfying. If only life would stack up so neatly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Faith cleaned up the dentist office after everyone else left. She did it every day she worked. Being an office manager was not something she really ever envisioned for herself. But when money started to get tight and Grandpa needed 24-hour care in the hospital, Willow Creek had really come through for her. Dr. Thad had offered her a job immediately. Three days a week.

And when she'd arrived, she knew they needed her. Within a few weeks, she'd organized all the files, got everything digitized, and taught the others a new computer program to keep them on top of things. Now just welcoming new patients and organizing work shifts for the other ladies seemed easy in comparison. So she stayed after to clean up. She needed the extra work.

Her grandfather's words came to mind. "There's nothing that some extra work won't help. Even if you don't feel better, at least you will have accomplished something." She smiled while locking the door, the trash bag hanging over her shoulder.

Grandpa was real special. When her parents passed away, he'd taken over getting her through high school and off to college, and then she'd helped him after college when taking care of everything had been too taxing for him. They had a good system. They needed each other.

And one of the major blessings of that situation were his nightly bookkeeping lessons. Neither of them had known how vital it would be for her to know how to run the Haws ranch. "I just think you're gonna need to know this someday, Faith."

His hand is stretched out still. Faith couldn't help but think that God was helping prepare her for everything that had happened since. There He was, preparing her for the mountain of work and stress that would fall on her shoulders after her grandfather's last stroke.

She'd given up asking why he'd had a stroke in the first place, she'd let go of her frustration that life wasn't moving forward just how she wanted it to. It was just too exhausting to cry out against what was. The fact of the matter was life had not gone as planned for her for a long time, and she didn't understand why, and she knew that complaining about it wasn't going to change a thing. But His hand *was* still stretched out, even when everything was falling apart. She had to hope it was.

Every now and then something would happen that would show her just how much the Lord was aware of her and how He was helping her all the time. And she clung to those tiny evidences even though some of the larger trials in her life did not seem to be getting any better.

She dropped the garbage bag in the dumpster and turned back toward her car. Everything was dark. The streetlight flickered, and her car was parked out by the street. She picked up her pace. So rarely did she ever feel worried or afraid in Willow Creek, but living alone all the time had taken a toll.

As she approached the front parking lot and entered the light, Randall stepped out from around the corner.

She jumped. "Randall."

"Oh, I'm sorry I made you jump." He draped his arm across her shoulders again. The weight of his wiry frame surprised her, and she immediately wished to be rid of it.

She tried to calm her heart. "What are you doing here?"

"I just figured you'd want some company."

She nodded. That was a nice gesture, she supposed. But after spending time with Decker, Randall just seemed small. That wasn't fair. Not every man could be as built as a Dawson. As Decker Dawson in particular. But that wasn't the only way that Randall was small. He seemed less in every way.

"I know we still have time to think about things, but I just wanted you to know that I'm so happy you're considering the offer. Not everyone is getting as much as you are. And for the sorry saps who are last to sign, last to sell, their property won't be worth hardly anything, not tied to a development or anything. There won't be nearly the financial benefit for them as you're getting right now."

She was tired of his sales pitch. "Why me?" He acted like it was a personal thing, like they were close buddies or

something, but she knew it was all about her land. And possibly her influence.

He stumbled for a moment. "Ah, you know, we've known each other for a long time." His voice trailed off and left it at that.

"You've known everyone in town for a long time. Why are you doing this, Randall?"

"Look, Faith. It's the truth. I think this is a good thing for our town. I think we're dying off slowly. And if we don't jump in now, we might lose our chance. And you? Honestly, Faith. You could use this. What's keeping you tied to the land? It's a major money maker and you could use a break." His eyes were lit with sincerity. She knew he meant what he said. And her heart softened toward him.

"I know. I'm sorry, Randall. It's just hard to think I'm letting down my family. What would Grandpa do? I don't even know." She sighed and leaned into him a little bit.

"Does it matter what he would do? He did what he wanted to do with the land when it was his, and now it's yours. He had his time and made the best choices for his time. What are the best choices for now? Think about it. This is a good developer. We're talking lovely neighborhoods, beautiful shopping, nice restaurants. The town will thrive. You will make enough money to do whatever you want. You could even stay here for the rest of your life."

She nodded.

"And you can pay for your grandpa to have whatever he needs for the rest of his life."

And that was the clincher really. Because, as it was, she was not going to have enough money to keep going, even with his insurance.

They stopped in front of her truck.

"Thanks, Randall. It really does mean a lot. I'm sorry if I seem stressed about it all."

"Like I said, take your time. But I do hope you come around. Really and truly, for your sake."

"It won't hurt you either." She studied him, wondering just how much of what he was saying was selfishly motivated.

"No, it won't. I'd benefit from this as much as anyone. But that's the thing. I hope we all benefit together. I want us to grow. And I want everyone to stay."

She opened her truck door. "I know. I'll get back to you soon."

He looked like he might say more but just nodded. And then he stood and waved until she drove out of the parking lot.

CHAPTER SIX

Decker helped his mom set the table.

“She’s a really special girl.”

“I know.”

“I’ve always thought so.”

He straightened the forks like he knew she liked. “Do you think I was blind all through high school not to see it?”

She laughed. “You saw it. You just weren’t ready to give your heart to someone.”

“How do you think she feels about me?”

Her hand waved for him to follow as she went back into the kitchen. “I think that’s something you’re going to need to discover.”

“But all this time? If she was interested in me, don’t you think she would have told me by now?”

She clucked her tongue. “Now that’s just not the way things work, son. She’s not gonna go telling you anything. Especially if it was so obvious that you didn’t see her as anything more than your buddy.”

He supposed she was right. “But do you think she might be interested now?”

“Honey, I told you. That’s something you’re gonna need to find out. And I bet you’re gonna have a lot of fun doing it.”

He took a platter from her and followed her back out to the oversized dining room table where they all ate. “I don’t know if it will be all that much fun. I kind of wonder if I’m going to be a mess.”

Her laugh filled the room. “And that’s part of the fun.”

He frowned. Fun for who? But he placed the food as directed and went back for more without responding.

Faith would be arriving any minute. Everyone knew not to be late for the Dawson family dinner. And she had said she was coming early.

When everything was set up just right, Bailey called in from the front door. “We’re here!”

And then Grace swept in with a kiss for her grandma and wave at Decker. Maverick stood in the doorway. His brother had been asked to fill big shoes after Dad had died. None of them would ever be their dad. Tommy Dawson was a name unto himself. But Mav did a good job. He respected their mom and kept the family together.

Decker felt for the guy. He would have moved to New York long before now if he hadn’t felt like leaving would be deserting Maverick. But now things were different. Maybe.

“Brother,” Decker called over to him.

“Deck.” They clapped each other on the back and bumped shoulders, and Decker knew he respected this man and his decisions. If Mav thought they should sell, there was probably something to it.

And Faith was considering it.

He sighed.

“Hey now, this is the best day of the week, what’s this sighing?”

“Dude, I’m not sighing.”

“Oh, he’s sighing.” Nash sauntered in. “You should have seen him out in the barn.”

“Yeah?”

“Take a look at the hay in the loft. It’s organized into rows.”

Maverick’s eyebrows went up.

Then Dylan stepped into the room with Kate, and everyone turned to the new baby in her arms.

Dylan winked at his twin as if he knew he’d just rescued him.

And then a soft voice from the front room called out, and everyone turned to Faith. “Hey ya.” She waved.

The uproar in response was gratifying, Decker had to admit. The women swooped in and loved on her like she deserved. His brothers teased and cajoled and made her blush until Decker thought she’d never make it all the way into the dining room.

Then Mom stepped into the space, hugged her like she deserved to be hugged, and hushed everyone. “It’s time to eat, now everyone sit down.”

They obediently took their seats, and Mama held out her hands. “Let’s pray.” They took hands, Faith at his side with his mama on the other, and she led their prayer. “Thou art so good to us. We are humbled by your continuous care, by your hand that is stretched out always in your great mercy.”

Faith's soft gasp beside him had him squeezing her hand a couple times. He'd love to know what was going on in her mind.

His mama continued for a bit more and then closed as she usually did. "We miss Dad. We miss his smile, but we feel his love as its tied into your love." And then she closed.

They all repeated, "Amen."

Faith may have wiped her eyes, but she was so quick he couldn't be sure. And then Nash called out, "Pass those potatoes down here before I faint from hunger."

"You're never going to faint from hunger." Bailey laughed but handed him the potatoes.

Kate pointed a fork at Nash. "He might, have you taken a look at him? The man eats like his stomach will never be full and still walks around as though nothing will stick to him."

"Thank you for the potatoes. Now if you could all get your choice of meats and other goodies and then send them my way, I'd be much obliged."

Everyone started digging in.

Faith was kind of quiet. They were waiting until the food would be passed down to their end.

"You okay?"

"Hm? Oh, totally." She half smiled and looked away.

He snorted. "Not buying it."

Her mouth dropped, and then she narrowed her eyes. "I said I'm fine."

"Ooooh! Did I just hear Faith say she's fine?" Dylan widened his eyes.

Mav whistled. "She said she's fine, oh boy. Deck, I'm sorry, dude."

Faith turned red at his side, and he wanted to protect her from whatever this was. "I don't think..."

But Mav interrupted. "Let us give you a rundown of what a woman means when she says she's fine."

Bailey and Kate seemed perfectly cheerful, almost enjoying this whole thing. Faith seemed embarrassed but nothing more. Maybe it was going to be okay. Decker kind of laughed uncomfortably but watched Faith.

"When a woman says she is fine, that means you better start running for the door."

Everyone laughed, but Bailey shook her head. "Oh stop. What it really means is—"

"Start groveling!" Dylan laughed.

Kate put a hand on her husband's arm. "No, it might really mean she's fine."

Then everyone burst out laughing together.

Decker looked from one to the other, more and more confused. Then he leaned closer to Faith. "You really are fine, aren't you?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it again. Then she shook her head.

But before she could say anything else, Mama came to the rescue. "I think it's time to talk about developing Willow Creek."

Everyone grew quiet.

"Mav doesn't need our answers yet." Deck really didn't want to talk about it.

"That's all fine, but I think there are issues to discuss. And we always get way more accomplished when we work

together, that includes brainstorming. So let's talk it through. What are the pros and cons?"

For a minute, everyone was really quiet.

Faith spoke up first. "Well, we can't ignore the money."

Deck tensed up, but then Bailey interjected. "I know Mav's the one suggesting the sale, but I don't want to see Willow Creek change. This town saved me. They took me in. They're perfect just the way they are."

Nash nodded. "Now, I'm not arguing any of that, but it's changing already no matter what we do."

"That's true," Deck heard himself saying. "We were walking through town, and all the stores are original owners, getting older. None of their kids seem interested in keeping it going."

Everyone started to give their thoughts. And at the end of the meal, they all agreed. No one wanted Willow Creek to change, but it might be impossible to prevent.

Decker cleared his throat during a lull in conversation. "Faith and I think we should have this kind of conversation as a town hall meeting."

The level of noise picked up again while everyone debated that idea.

"The truth is, I'm not sure I want their opinion." Nash put his cup down. "Why should I consult them about our land?" He held up his hands. "I know that's not going to sit right with some. But our great-grandpa worked hard for this land, and I don't think he would be too keen on the idea that we just threw it away because some town hall meeting had thoughts on it."

“Or if they want the land to stay because they enjoy the view, but they’re not paying for it or working it or helping us to keep it,” Decker pointed out. The more he talked, the more he sounded like he wanted to sell, which he did not. Did he?

Dylan nodded. “I agree with Deck. I think it’s much more likely the smaller landholders will be wanting us to keep their view intact. If we put a bunch of houses up on the hill, they’re gonna have to look at those.” He toyed with his fork. “But I do think it would be a good idea to open up the conversation. That weasel Randall will win if we are all afraid to talk to each other.”

“He’s not exactly a weasel.” Faith pressed her hand into the table. “He’s actually quite nice and has the town’s best interests in mind just like everyone else.” Her cheeks colored.

And Decker was suddenly filled with a sick worry. What if she and Randall had developed some kind of thing. He shared a look with Dylan who looked equally sick.

Deck stood. “Well, now that we’ve deteriorated into talk of Randall McKinney, let’s help Mama clean up, and then Faith and I talked about taking a ride.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful. You doing your old chores?” Mama laughed.

“Yes, we are, Mrs. Dawson.” Faith rested a hand on her arm as she stood beside Decker. “It’s been too long since I’ve been out on the property. I want to tell Grandpa all about it.”

The mood changed somewhat after that. “You tell your grandpa how much we love him.” Bailey’s shining eyes were

full of caring.

Deck was proud of his family. They were all good people with other's best interests in mind. He knew they would make a good decision about whether or not to sell. Or at least he hoped so.

Once he was out in the pastures, he knew what he hoped that decision would be.

He didn't think he could part with any of it. Everywhere he looked, he was filled with memories of his dad, thoughts of his grandpa, stories of his great-grandpa. This was Dawson land, tamed and cultivated and grown by Dawsons. His own blood, sweat, and tears had combined with generations before to make it what it was.

As they rode up to the highest pastures that rested along the hillside, he drank it in and knew he wanted to live, breathe, and die knowing that this land was still in Dawson hands.

But did he want to actually live on the land? He thought of New York. He was perfectly happy to leave it for a time, but he wanted to know he could always come back.

Faith pulled up beside him. "I'm feeling actual pain at the thought of giving all this up."

His eyes flitted to hers in relief.

"But I think I'm going to have to do it." She looked away.

He couldn't stop the words that came out. "You can't do it."

She shook her head and turned from him, guiding her horse to face the opposite direction. "You have no right to say that."

“But I do. I’m telling you as a friend, as a...fellow great-grandchild of the original owners of this land. You will be half a person if you lose all this.” The words didn’t sound exactly right coming out of his mouth. They sounded almost untrue. But he defiantly carried on. “Is that what you’re gonna tell the people in our town hall meeting? That you’re caving? What did Randall offer you? Something sweet I’d imagine.”

He just kept on talking, and the longer he spoke the more he knew he should stop. But he was filled with a sudden passion for the beauty around him and a sudden fear that by selling out she would be lost to him forever. That she would leave Willow Creek and their connection would be gone.

“Look, Deck, I don’t think I have another choice.” She rode away, slowly at first and then picking up her pace until she was galloping down the fence line, the border between their two properties.

And he just stood and watched her go.

What had come over him? Why could he not just keep his feelings to himself?

Because half the time he didn’t even know what they were.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Faith worked furiously in her barn. She cleaned out stalls, watered horses, fed animals, sprayed down the place, and then got out the wood stain and began work on the older sections of the barn and the fencing. She lugged some planks and nails onto her driver mower and out to the fence to start mending weak spots in the split rail.

They had hired hands and helpful neighbors, but the more she could do herself, the more money they saved. And this was just the kind of thing she needed right now. Good, hard work.

By the time lunchtime hit, she needed to hop in the shower and prep for the town hall meeting. She could barely move her limbs. Lifting her toothbrush felt like a heavy weight system on the end of her arm.

She dressed in a light and flowy dress. She was feeling pretty and, for some reason, wanted to feel comfortable. She'd been wearing barn clothes and work clothes all day. So her nice strappy shoes and soft, cool dress were just the thing. She left her hair down, and it fell softly against her shoulders. She laughed to herself. She hadn't been on a

real date in years, but something about this evening felt like one.

And that was simply because she knew Decker would be there. She shook her head. She had to stop thinking this way. He was not into her. He was too hard on her. And insensitive on top of it all.

Did she really believe that?

She tried not to, but his pressure, his insistence, that she not sell had seemed too harsh. He acted conflicted, but when it came down to it, he was scared to sell, afraid to lose their land, afraid to lose their lifestyle. And she didn't blame him. If she didn't want to sell, but the Dawsons did, she'd be stuck with their new construction bordering her property. Who knows what they would build there. Businesses? Homes? Instead of the beautiful stretch of land separated only by some barbwire, buildings would obstruct her view. And that was likely exactly what Decker was thinking when she talked about selling.

She parked her truck and made her way through a surprisingly full parking lot and into the town hall.

Loud, happy talking led her to their meeting room. And as she suspected, it was packed. She smiled and waved as various people called out to her. What a town. What a lovely, friendly, family-like town.

Shortly after she arrived, Maverick Dawson stood up in the front of the room.

She got surprisingly emotional thinking of his dad, their mayor for many years. She missed Papa Dawson. Her eyes found Mrs. Dawson, and the woman was already watching her. Their eyes connected, and her warm expression

comforted Faith somewhat. She'd already seen Decker when she walked in. He was at the back of the room, leaning against the wall. But she didn't look at him now. She needed to be levelheaded and clear-thinking for this meeting. It was time to make some decisions. Or at least it was time to listen, to brainstorm, and to be assertive.

Maverick joked with everyone for a moment, and then he said, "We've all heard stories of the first group of people to tame this land. We know the first member of our family to buy Willow Creek land, we have heard the stories. And for many of us, the land is a part of them, a part of our family, and worth a great deal indeed."

A low rumble of appreciation moved through the group.

Maverick was talking like he was going to keep the land. Faith's heart sank. It was going to be a lot more difficult to sell if she did so alone.

He continued, "However, as we consider them and their great sacrifices, we sometimes forget that what they did was new, revolutionary, different. They were brave enough to step outside the norm and venture into the frontier, to be the first to own land here, to settle. That takes courage. And that is just what we might be asked to do now."

The rumbling continued, this time less pleasant.

"I ask you to consider those first settlers. If given the option to sell now, would they take it?"

And that was the very answer Faith hoped Grandpa could tell her.

A voice from the back filled the room. "I say they would!" Randall walked down the aisle and in between chairs

pushed together here and there. He smiled at everyone and seemed perfectly comfortable in front of them all.

This was something she had not predicted. What was Randall doing there? She felt almost a bit guilty that she'd secretly hoped Randall would never know about the meeting.

"Maverick, do you mind if I take a minute?"

"Everyone will have time to say something. You can be first if you like." Maverick seemed a bit more annoyed than Faith would have expected him to be. If Maverick wanted to sell, wouldn't Randall be his favorite person? "We have a time limit. I'll figure out what that is while you're talking."

"Understood. Now I know for some of you, I'm an unwelcome presence. There might even be a few who hoped I wouldn't hear about this meeting."

Did his eyes flick to hers? She felt her chest tighten.

"But I'm a member of this community just like the rest of you, and I've lived here my whole life. What I have to offer you is the best deal you're gonna get for your land."

The rumbling grew louder.

"This developer is also the best news for this town in a long time. They have a master plan, which I've shown each of you, in your homes, that will ensure the beauty of Willow Creek is preserved. They are bringing in conveniences. Ladies, do you enjoy driving thirty minutes to get good shopping? Do you ever wish we could just see a movie right here? And what about a hotel? A nice upscale hotel for our guests to stay in?"

The rumbling calmed, and people started to listen.

“What about a gym or a recreational facility? A large grocery store?”

Someone called from the back, “What about our bakery? Feed Store? Tractor Supply?”

He nodded. “You’re concerned about the stores that already exist, about the livelihood of the people already here.”

“Yes, what about Doug and Judy?” The people started calling out other store owners, and Faith’s throat tightened. She loved them too. She loved every single part of this town. But she also loved her grandpa. And she had to live on something.

“You can support all those establishments. You can still have Doug cut your hair. Eat Judy’s burgers, and buy donuts from Mabel. But the new folks might not appreciate our older traditions, and they would be shopping at the newer establishments. What I suggest, what this developer brings to the table is quite literally the best of both worlds. The master plan encourages a quaint and vibrant main street, a historic district. And all of our staples would contribute to that feel and vibe and, happily for us, also enable us to stay in business.” He kept talking, and the more he said, the more hopeful Faith felt. Selling wasn’t going to destroy her home; it was going to make it better. All those additions sounded like improvements to her, and no matter what they built, they couldn’t take away the beautiful hills or the big blue skies. Not all of the property would be gone, not in her lifetime.

By the time Randall finished talking, most people in the room had hopeful expressions. He finished on one final

thought, "No matter what you decide, it's always a good thing to hype up the energy in the town, to get some national news, to win some more rodeos. The more appealing the place is, the more people will come." He smiled, this time a more sincere expression, and then left through the door.

The room was quiet for a time, and then Decker called out from the back, "I say we bring back the festival. What this town needs is another Willow Creek Rodeo."

"Amen to that!" Dylan supported his twin from the front row.

Everyone's positive responses to that idea were heartwarming. But Faith was feeling unsettled. She stood. "Might I say something?"

Maverick gave her the floor.

"I agree. I think we should have a festival. I think we should bring as much money into Willow Creek as we can. And national news coverage. That's something. And we would have fun doing it. And it would bring our town together." She wanted to say *one last time*. Why did selling her land feel like the end of Willow Creek? "I just want you to know that I love this town. I love every person in it. My grandpa loves this town. And if I sell, it won't be because I've stopped loving you or because it is the right thing for grandpa. It will be because I had no other choice." She choked on her last words, and Mama Dawson was up in an instant to pull her into her arms.

Others joined them. She felt arms and bodies behind and beside and around her until she was at the center of a lot of love. Then the crowd dispersed, and she wiped her eyes.

Maverick lingered. "I think that's important to remember. No matter what happens. This town has a whole lot of love. Now, who wants to plan a rodeo?"

They moved topics, and even though no one else shared what they were going to do, Faith felt better that she had.

By the end of the evening, she was signed up for barrel racing again and baking up her favorite muffins. Bailey was going to put on a concert and invite other big names. They would start reaching out to rodeo stars. She expected to see the Lost Creek Boys come riding in. The town was coming together. And she couldn't be happier.

Except for Decker's stubborn position on the opposite side of the room. He didn't move any closer. And she suspected he hadn't changed any of his thoughts about selling. Or about Faith selling, either.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Decker was talking with his friend at Botts and Lindel, a huge accounting firm in New York, when Henry said, “They’re still talking about bringing you on. I know you sort of turned them down, but the door’s still wide open if that’s a direction you want to go.”

Where he typically might have laughed and hedged, he now took a moment to seriously consider the offer. If Willow Creek was up for sale, he was free. Wasn’t he?

“I’ll give that some thought. It might be time for me to make things more permanent with Botts and Lindel.”

“That’s excellent news. Let me know when you want to open up talks. We’ll get the contract committee ready with two sets of pens.”

Decker laughed. “Thanks, man.”

“Hey, no, thank you.”

Decker had consulted for them on and off. He’d done some piecemeal temp stuff, and he’d helped his share of clients over the years, but he’d always hesitated when it came to moving to New York City.

Mama was a large part of the reason, as was Mav and his stress of having to take care of everything all the time. But now? Maybe now might be a good time to talk to everyone about his long-held dream of working at a huge business in New York City.

An uncomfortable heaviness sat in his gut every time he thought about it, but he pushed it aside. This might be the silver lining to their situation. This might be his chance to do something he'd always wanted to do. He couldn't argue with the fact that it all seemed to be falling in place at exactly the right time.

He made his way to the kitchen for a triple-decker club sandwich, his favorite Dawson special, and was surprised to see Dylan in there. "Hey, bro." They hugged. "It's not often you can surprise me."

"No, I'm surprised you weren't out here earlier, but I think I heard you were working."

"Yeah." He leaned back on the counter but hesitated to tell his brother about Botts and Lindel. He didn't know why, but he didn't feel comfortable sharing the news, not yet. "So how's Kate?"

"She's good. We're all good. Our little guy sure acts like you, though."

"Ha! And that's a problem?"

"Maybe we'll leave him with you for an afternoon, and you tell us. I'm getting a real workout keeping up with him. Who knew someone so tiny could have so much energy."

Decker laughed. His brother had become even better once he'd gotten married, and fatherhood really suited him.

"I thought for sure you and Faith were going to progress."

"But now?" Decker tensed. He didn't want to talk about Faith. He knew he'd messed up, and he wasn't sure how to make it better. Because, truthfully, he still felt the same way. If the Haws sold out, it felt like a betrayal to the whole town.

"Well, you didn't seem as friendly with each other the other night."

Decker grunted.

"And you can't seem to talk about her without some manly guttural sounds. What's up?"

"She wants to sell. I don't like it. And I keep saying ridiculous things to her about not selling, which just makes her unhappy. I don't want to give her that kind of pressure. It's really not fair. But I can't help the way I feel. I think I've pushed her away."

Dylan nodded. "Have you talked to her about it?"

"Not really, because I always just seem to blurt out all this stuff without thinking."

"Like what?"

"Well, like, if the Haws sell, Willow Creek will be ruined for us and everyone else in the town."

Dylan whistled.

"Well, do you want to have a subdivision at the property line? They are right next door."

"No, I don't, but I don't think pushing her into bankruptcy, kicking her out of Willow Creek, and giving her property to the bank is a better idea."

Decker's mouth went dry. "That's an important thought." He croaked, and then poured himself a cup of water. "Do

you think that's what would happen to her?"

"Yes, I do. And I'm pretty sure her grandpa would want that least of all."

Decker's eyes lit. "You know, you're right. Of course he wouldn't want that." His smile grew. "Sometimes I think you got all the wisdom, and I got all the looks."

"Yeah, whatever. Now get out of here."

"Where am I going?"

"To talk to Faith."

"I am?" He stood taller. "I am." He turned to walk out of the room. What was he gonna say to Faith? They weren't a thing. But they were friends. And he wanted them to start being something more. It was time to admit a few things, wasn't it?

As his truck pulled into her place, he was filled with a wave of nostalgia. He had plenty of memories sitting in that very farmhouse, gathered around a warm kitchen table, laughing. He'd come to this front door a million times it felt like, to pick up his best friend. And his best friend needed him. Right now.

When he was in high school, his family started talking about living in Willow Creek forever. His dad had just introduced the idea of always being home for family Sunday dinners, no matter where life took them, and Decker had left the house feeling down.

And guilty.

Was he the only Dawson who wanted to get out? It's not like he wanted to leave forever, and it's not like he wanted anything to change, but he had definitely taken the news of Sunday dinners with disappointment instead of the joy his

brothers seemed to feel. Was it anti-Dawson to want to go out in the world and do different things?

He did his time in the rodeo. He was the best roper in the world for a brief season. He loved Willow Creek, obviously, and couldn't bear to see it change. But he had skills he wanted to use elsewhere, maybe. At least the idea of Botts and Lindel appealed to him. Would he really do it? He didn't know. But he had to think about it.

Faith came to mind.

And as much as he tried to move her somewhere else, she persisted. Her face, her laugh, her personality, and oddly, the times they had climbed trees on her property. He laughed to himself. All those years ago, when he'd told her his worry about leaving, she'd just listened and said, "I think Willow Creek will go on without you."

At the time, he hadn't really loved her response. But over the years, he'd turned to it often. Yes, yes it would.

Then why was he so reactive to the thought of selling?

Because he would feel responsible. If he stayed, he could make things work. If he left, and they had to sell, it would be his fault. Maybe that was it. He wasn't entirely sure, but he knew it was physically painful to think of losing any of their family's land. It was painful to think that he would one day ride out to check the fencing on the Haws-Dawson property line, and it would no longer be Faith's land on the other side.

He squinted in the sun. Faith was out on the tractor mowing a field. He laughed to himself. She was gonna be out on that thing all day.

He made his way to their barn and grabbed one of the four-wheelers and took off out to the back pasture toward her.

She was riding away from him, and with the noise of her mower, she wouldn't know he was coming. He watched her work. The closer he came, the better he could see the sun shining off her hair and the smaller details like a shirt damp with sweat, or the stray hairs blowing around her.

A woman out on her land.

Just seeing her like this brought the realization that this moment, right here, was how he'd always imagined a beautiful woman to be. Strong, smart, hard-working, gorgeous. All encompassing. She was more because of who she was, where she belonged, and the work she did. All this time, Faith Haws had been right in front of him.

And he really was an idiot if he messed this up.

He pulled to a stop outside of the pasture she was mowing, jogged over to her next row, and stood right in the middle of it.

As predicted, at the end of her current row, she turned and faced him. The engine cut. And she waited, watching him.

He started walking. And then she turned the engine back on.

With a laugh, he realized she was gonna start coming straight toward him.

But before she could stop again, he swung up to sit behind her. "Well, this is nice."

Her smell, sweat, the good kind, fruity shampoo in her hair, and Faith, just the comfortable, happy smell of Faith

filled the air around them. Something earthy and sweet lifted up from the newly cut grass. His hands itched to pull her back against him.

She kept driving. But a small smile played on her lips. She turned. "Hey." Her blue eyes sparkled at him. Then she faced the front again.

"Hey yourself. How are you doing?"

For a minute she didn't answer, then she shrugged. "You mean, am I still mad at you for getting after me about the land?"

"Uh, yeah, partly that. And just in general. I think about you. How are you doing?"

"No, I'm not still mad, but I want you to cut it out."

"Done."

"What?" She turned to look at him. "Just like that?"

"Yeah. What right do I have, really? To tell you the truth, it's coming from a very honest place. I just react without thinking, and it's strong and loud, and I'm sorry."

She studied him for a moment, and her eyes shone with sadness. "I respect that. I know you just really love the place."

"It's more than that." He kind of wished he hadn't said that. Did he want to tell her that he thought he was losing her as well as the land? But there was no going back now.

She waited.

"I don't want things to change. I...I like riding out across our property knowing you're right there on the other side of the fence." He paused, tense, waiting.

She turned off the engine and turned most of the way around to face him. "Just what are you saying, Decker

Dawson?" The flash of gold in her blue eyes shone brighter than usual. The combination of hope and strength and even wariness emboldened and melted his heart just enough. He smiled.

"I don't want to lose you, plain and simple. This whole thing made me realize I love the land, sure. I love being a Dawson, of course. But what I really don't want to lose? You." He watched her, waiting for embarrassment or discomfort to cross her face. But instead, a tenderness that he'd never seen before filled her expression, and she smiled back. The light that shone around her, through her, even in her, stunned him for a second. He laughed at the joy of it and reached for her hand. "You gonna say something?"

Her grin widened. "I don't know what to say."

He tugged her ponytail out, and she didn't complain like she would have ten years ago. With her hair down all around her, he ran a hand through the blond silk. "Well, you're happy about it. I guess that's a good sign." He loved the feel of her hair.

She closed her eyes and nodded. "I'm happy about it." She twisted so she had one leg up between them and now fully faced him on the seat. "I'm so happy if what you're saying is you'd like to be with me more."

"If you'll let me." He tugged at her hand. "If I stop getting angry about selling the land?"

"Yeah, I'll let you. I feel it too, you know. I don't want to let the land go." Her lips quivered, and he pulled her close, twisting so he could hold her on his lap and hug her in his arms. "I'm sorry. I hate to see you having to bear so much."

When he knew tears were really coming, it tore at him in ways he wasn't expecting. With hands running down her back, he murmured, "I'm really sorry. Forget I said a single thing."

She sniffed, her face in his chest. "When I'm out here like I always am, I just don't think I can sell." She lifted her head to look at him. "But then I sit at home with the bills and think about Grandpa and the care he needs, and I don't know how I *cannot* sell." Her lashes lifted, and the pain he saw in her face really amped everything up for him. "I don't have enough," she admitted, and he wondered at the difficulty in admitting something like that. "I might not have a choice."

The pain of her admission hurt him too. The Haws. Her grandpa. What would he want Decker to do here? Help his granddaughter, certainly. He decided, no matter what, he would help Faith. He pressed his lips to her forehead. "Faithy Haws, I'm gonna do whatever I can to help you."

She leaned into his kiss, and suddenly, it wasn't enough. If she lifted her chin to stare up into his face again, he wouldn't resist her lips any longer.

But she didn't. And he was glad, because they had to do things right and adjust their relationship slowly to something new. He was going to do this carefully. But it took all of his upbringing and a heavy dose of thoughts of Mama Dawson to help him remember that, because she was close and crying and so, so irresistible.

CHAPTER NINE

Faith couldn't believe what she was seeing and hearing from Decker Dawson. Was he taking things to the next level? Finally? Staring into his face, it certainly looked and felt like he was. He would have kissed her. She knew he would have. One good thing about the two of them was how easily she could read his mind. She wasn't as good as Dylan, but pretty close.

"Do you want to help me finish the field?"

He squinted his eyes, looking in the direction of the good one-third of the pasture left, and then shrugged. "Sure!"

She laughed. "Excellent." She turned back around to face the front and turned the key.

And then to her great pleasure, he wrapped his arms around her. "This is how I mow lawns now."

"I can support this." She leaned back into him. With her foot on the gas and a couple fingers directing the mower, not much was required for the task. Which was good since he was not letting her do much else besides pay careful attention to him.

He nuzzled the back of her neck, sending a shower of happy goosebumps down her arms. "I could get used to this. Maybe we should do all our chores together."

"Like we used to."

"Yeah, checking the fence line is one thing. This is way better."

"Unless we rode the same horse."

He pressed his lips to her skin. "Now that is the best idea you've had."

She squealed and wiggled away. "Deck."

"What?"

When she turned to him, his face was so boyish, so fun, so like his middle school self that she could only smile and wish he would do more of whatever he was doing.

Up and down, row after row, they played and laughed and teased and combined all those years of friendship with a new and addicting attraction that had Faith absolutely humming with awareness.

Could life be any better than these moments right then mowing her back pasture? She didn't think so. And while she knew all the same problems waited for them both, nothing seemed to be quite as bad as it was before.

When they finished and she left the mower in the barn, he grabbed her hand. "I've always held your hand."

She nodded, enjoying the familiar comfort.

"It means something different to me now."

"I like that." She turned to him. "All of this. I feel like I'm living in this wonderful dream and that if I fall asleep, it won't be there when I wake." She shrugged. Maybe it sounded crazy, but it was the truth.

"I'm not going anywhere. So don't you be worrying about that. We have a lot of exploring to do right here between us."

"Like is this really going to work?"

"I have a feeling it's going to be the most perfect thing to ever happen to me." His eyes, full of caring and sincerity, bore into her and testified of the truth of his words.

"Then I don't think I could ever be happier than I am right now."

His smile grew and he pressed his forehead to hers. "Then I hope to make you happier still."

"What if we don't get along?"

"Then we'll work it out. We already know we can get along great."

"What if I don't like kissing you?" She choked on her laugh, the words flowing out in a spontaneous tease.

But the look he gave her was anything but teasing. "That, my Faithy Haws, will not happen."

She swallowed. "What if we break up, and then we aren't even friends?" That was the real worry she had, the only one.

But he held up his right hand. "I promise to always be your friend to the bitter end, no matter what."

She gasped. Their old truce. Whenever they'd fought about something, they made each other repeat this promise. "You remembered."

"Of course. How many times did you make me say that?"

"Every time." She raised her own right hand. "I promise to be your friend to the bitter end, no matter what."

"See, we'll never let anything ruin us." He winked. "And besides, we are a couple of adults now. I would think we know how to work things out, right?"

"I guess so. I hope so." She walked him out to his truck. "Come over tomorrow."

"Done."

"Don't you want to know why?"

"Nope."

"Well, I'll tell you. We're baking. We have food to deliver."

"Excellent. Did you know I make a mean chocolate chip cookie?"

"I did know that."

He frowned. "Is there anything you don't know?"

"Maybe not. Is that so bad?"

"How will I ever surprise you?"

She laughed and felt it from her toes to her head, the most delicious happiness. "Oh, Decker. You've surprised me so much today I don't know if I'll recover."

"Perfect. Expect more of the same tomorrow, then."

He pulled her into his arms and held her close, like he always had but more. That's what this all felt like. The same bond, but more. And she loved that more.

"When should I come over tomorrow?" He stepped away.

"I get off work at three."

"I'll come with some takeout for dinner."

"Mama's takeout?"

"The best there is."

He climbed into the cab and closed the door. She watched his truck drive down her drive and then out on the

main road and out of sight. And then she reached out and clutched the fence post like she might never let go. What a beautiful thing to happen. Decker Dawson wanted to see where this could go. Finally.

Her cheeks hurt from her smile, but she couldn't stop. Today really might be the best day of her life.

Until the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Faith? This is Janice at the nurses station at Willow Creek Hospital."

"Is everything alright?"

"Oh yeah, honey, he's just fine in there. No change."

"I didn't come in today. Maybe I'll come on over to sit with him."

"You're always welcome, of course. We never know what kind of good it will do to sit and talk to them. Can't hurt at any rate, as long as you have the time. Some people don't have the time or resources, and that's okay too."

"Mm, true."

"But that's not why I'm calling. I have your paperwork here and noticed that Mr. Haws has been nonresponsive for four weeks. Is that what you've noticed?"

Her heart pounded. She could guess where this conversation was going, and she was not ready to talk about it. "He responded the other day. I was talking to him about how the newly mowed grass smells, and he squeezed my hand."

She was quiet for a moment. "We've never seen any response like that. Sometimes patients can twitch. It has been known to confuse their loved ones."

Irrational defensiveness and anger and sadness all swirled around in response. Faith didn't need to be having this conversation. She didn't want to talk about whether or not her grandpa had really tried to communicate with her. She didn't want to talk about how long he'd not responded or the options she had to turn off his machines. She didn't want to talk about any of it because she was not ready to let him go. So she just said, "Thank you. I'll keep that in mind."

"So, why I was calling, once a patient has been nonresponsive for this amount of time, it is our standard procedure to reach out with your options. We have counselling and specialists and a support group to help you explore all options and navigate the emotional repercussions of your choices."

Faith's heart clenched as though the weight of the world rested on it and then relaxed. "I appreciate your call. I just don't think I can talk about this right now."

"I understand. I'll email you the packet so you can take a look when you're ready."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, darling. Oh and someone left the loveliest bouquet. It will make you smile when you see it."

"Oh, great. Thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome. Bye now."

Faith hated that the first thought to enter her mind when the nurse hung up was that if Grandpa was not on life support, maybe she wouldn't have to sell. She pushed away that thought as soon as it came, but it had left its mark, and though she was ashamed, there was nothing she could do about it.

CHAPTER TEN

Decker went home in high spirits. He had no idea how comfortable things were going to be with Faith. He should have known. Of course things were easy. He'd known her forever. As they transitioned to being more than friends, things could jump really easily to something serious, but taking it slow felt like a good idea.

Though he didn't know how much longer he was going to wait to kiss her. Now that he'd thought about it once, it was the thought that wouldn't go away, the thing that made him smile, and the temptation he couldn't wait to succumb to. He laughed. As if kissing her was anything other than holy. She was the woman he most admired. How could it be anything but an expression of his love and caring.

Love. An interesting word. Of course he loved Faith. He'd loved her forever. As a friend, as a neighbor, as a person. But now the word sat a bit awkwardly on his tongue. He'd have to toy with it for a while before he figured out just how it applied to Faith now.

The next day, there he was, standing on her front porch with two brown bags full of ingredients and other items

from the grocery store. He'd never purchased flour before, or nutmeg for that matter. He'd had to ask so many questions of the workers at their local Hammerdukes Groceries that a bagger took pity on him and took his list to help him find the rest of the items.

When Faith's door opened, his mouth dried up like the desert. She had her hair on top of her head, pulled off her long and slender neck. A pink apron was tied around her waist, and her cheeks were rosy with a dot of flour on the tip of her nose. And everything about her was basically what he'd been looking for his whole life without knowing it.

"Hi." She breathed, her smile growing.

"Hi yourself." He lifted his arms. "I've bought out Hammerdukes. It's time to make some pie." He followed her into her house. "That is what we're making, right?"

"Yes. Pie and cookies and bread if we have time. Sweet rolls."

"Good heavens, woman."

"Well, there are some people who could use some love. And this is how we're doing it today."

"You're not going to get any complaints from me. Just tell me what to do, and I'm gonna do it."

"That's what I like to hear." She pointed toward the kitchen. "Now, you're gonna need to get yourself to the sink first."

"Don't you worry. My mama trained me well."

"Oh, I know. I should basically be asking you for a tutorial here." She laughed.

He washed his hands, and there was a sort of long pause, long enough it grew awkward. He turned around,

and her cheeks turned bright red.

“Oh sorry.” She laughed, a funny nervous laugh, and then moved over to the counter to dig into the bags he brought.

He dried his hands slowly, wondering what that was all about. Then he stepped up close behind her. “Did I get everything?” His voice was quiet and close to her ear. She seemed to pause a moment and close her eyes, and then she nodded. “Yep. Looks like everything.”

His grin grew. Then he reached around her with one hand and peered into the bag over her shoulder. “You sure about that? I could help you look.”

She laughed and then swatted him. “Oh stop. Stop. We have work to do.”

“I’m just trying to do the work here.”

“Mm-hmm.” She turned and handed him one of the bags. “How about we start with the crust.”

“Sounds good. Like I said, you talk, I do what you say.”

“This just keeps getting better and better.” She laughed again, and he thought the sound of her laughter was prettier now than he ever thought in high school. Everything was better now.

She poured the flour in a bowl, slightly softened the butter, and added a pinch of salt. “Okay, here we need to combine this butter with the flour. And you do it with this pastry cutter, or even a fork will work.” She cut into the mixture and twisted, making the butter smaller and smaller. “What do you think?”

“I got this.” He grinned. But when he took over, it just didn’t function the same way it had for her. But she’d

reached for a second bowl and at least pretended not to notice his awkward attempts. "This is tough work."

"It's worth it, though, right?"

"Oh yeah. When you do it? Absolutely."

"You remember my pies?"

"How could I forget? Best thing a girl has ever given me."

She laughed.

"And maybe the only thing, but that doesn't discount the pie."

She shook her head as though she just couldn't understand something.

"What?"

"I don't get it."

He paused to see her expression. She seemed more curious than anything. So he leaned his hip against the counter to fully face her.

"Why didn't you ever have a girlfriend or anything in high school?"

His gaze travelled over her face, lingering on her lips for a moment with a new wave of desire to pull her close and kiss her. Then he considered her question. "I don't know. I guess Dylan had enough girlfriend for the both of us?" He shrugged.

"And Shelby was a lot of work. I can see that."

He knew it was more than that, but he wasn't exactly sure how to say it. "And you know, I had you." He grinned, feeling self-conscious. "We were good together."

The pink to her cheeks made him curious again. "What about you? Why weren't you ever dating anyone?"

She turned back to her bowl and stirred lemon juice into her berries. "I dated. A little." She didn't say anything else for a minute, then turned back. "I guess I'm the same. People thought we were together."

For the first time he wondered if their friendship had held her back in that way. "Did the guys stay away because of me?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it, then she shrugged. "I don't know. I always thought...I don't know. Does it matter?"

Things were tense all of a sudden. She obviously didn't want to talk about this right now. But maybe they should?

"Faithy." He reached for her hand. "The only reason every guy in the school wasn't all over you is because I was there first. And we were good friends. You were everything I needed back then. But I should have been more considerate, I'm sorry." He had already mentally kicked himself for being as blind as a bat all those years.

She nodded. "Deck, you were awesome. You *are* awesome." She squeezed his hand before letting go. "I'm happy things are...changing?" She shrugged. "But if we don't start moving a little faster here, we are never gonna get any of this in the oven where it belongs. Now mix that. Add two tablespoons water, and then you're gonna have to get your hands dirty."

"Yes, ma'am."

They worked a moment more until she had a bowl full of fresh strawberries covered in a delicious smelling glaze and he had a ball of dough on the counter.

“With this, you just need to roll it out and we’ll get it in your pie dish.”

He lifted the rolling pin. “Wanna help me with this?” With a gentle curve of his lip, she was stepping closer with her arms around him.

He was thrilled all the way down to his toes.

Her soft hands covered his, and with swift movements, she guided him to press the rolling pin into the dough and spread it out into a deftly managed circle on the counter.

When she was finished, he missed her closeness immediately. “Now what?” He pointed to the perfectly shaped circle. “How do we get that in there?” He pointed to the pie dish.

“Just like this.” She rested the rolling pin in the center of the dough and folded over one half, then used the pin to lower it into the dish. “Voila.” Her proud smile made him laugh.

“Now that’s something.”

“Sprinkle cinnamon and sugar on there. We gotta get it in the oven and cooled before we add all these berries.”

“Excellent.”

They moved on to cookies, which Decker had made before, so he was much more help. But he secretly wished there was another reason for her arms to go around him.

While pulling out the last batch of cookies, she was already prepping to make the muffins when the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” he called over his shoulder while walking to the door.

But before he could get there, Randall opened it. "Faith! I'll just put these on the front table..." He stopped, obviously shocked to see Decker there.

And Deck was equally surprised to see Randall walking in like he'd done it a million times.

"Randall." Decker reached for a tray of something in the intruder's hands. "I'll take that."

But he pulled it closer. "No, it's okay. I got it. I wanted to tell Faith it's here."

"I can let her know."

They stared each other down for a minute, neither saying anything, and Decker kind of wished he could send him on his way, but instead, he called for Faith.

"Randall's here."

She peeked her head around the corner, wiping down her hands. "Oh! Thank you, Randall! Those look great!" She hugged him and accepted a kiss on her cheek, and Decker felt all kinds of foreign emotions hammer through him. Images of sending the guy out the door filled his mind as well as getting him out on a football field for a really hard tackle. He couldn't quite see himself sending a fist into his face, but to say he wasn't happy to see the man was an understatement. He stood taller and stepped closer to Faith. He couldn't help it. It was like every protective instinct was on overdrive, and this guy was stealing his land and his woman, or at least that's what it felt like.

Randall looked from one to the other. "Are we delivering this afternoon?"

"I, um." She glanced up at Deck and then to Randall. "Yup. We've got a whole bunch of deliveries. Thanks for

bringing over some more baked goods.”

“I know how much Mrs. Alred loves your scones.” He looked hopefully toward the kitchen.

She laughed, and Decker grew more irritated. Randall knew about Faith’s scones? He himself had never had a scone from Faith. And suddenly the idea that anyone else had been close to her, particularly the same weasel who was trying to steal land from the people of Willow Creek, was sitting absolutely wrong with him.

But Faith just kept smiling and acting friendly.

“Come on back, then. I have a scone waiting for you.”

And then Decker had to follow Randall back to the kitchen, acting like nothing was wrong even though he felt like they’d entered some sort of DEFCON 5.

“Have you had her scones? They are the best I’ve ever tried.” Randall turned to say these foreign words to Decker, words he’d like to erase from the air that caught them.

“No, I haven’t.”

The satisfaction and victorious glint that lit his eyes were almost more than Decker could handle at the moment. What was wrong with him? If Dylan saw him like this, he’d be sending him out to wrestle the pigs or something. He took two breaths and followed the no-good Randall back into Faith’s kitchen.

“I’ll just grab myself a napkin.” He moved into the pantry. “Wow, you’ve really organized things in here.”

The more Randall talked, the more Decker wanted to go sit on the back porch until he left. But then he’d be leaving Randall alone in the kitchen with Faith.

So instead of overreacting or leaving, he leaned back against the far counter, crossed his arms and waited.

They talked. They laughed. Randall ate treats, and then right when Decker thought for sure the man would leave, Faith started packing stuff into baskets and bags. "Let's get this stuff ready. It's time to make our deliveries."

"Wait, Randall's coming?" The words left his mouth before he could stop them, and he immediately regretted them as a smile filled the interloper's face, a weaselly self-satisfied smile. But the words were said, and now he had to deal with it.

"Yes. He's still an important part of the town, no matter what." She nodded at Decker and flashed him some kind of warning look.

So he was going to have to do this? With Randall and Faith. And be happy about it. Time to put on his big boy pants, as Maverick would say.

He clapped his hands once and rubbed them together. "Of course he is. Randall's been around since the very beginning. I have pictures with this guy in the fourth grade. Time to get moving. Let's get this going."

And he did. He lugged the many baskets and bags of goodies that Faith and Randall packed up out to his truck.

When it was all in the back, he opened the door for Faith to climb in, but Randall nodded and scooted in first.

Faith followed with an apologetic look, and, suspiciously, she looked like she might burst out laughing any minute.

Decker closed the truck door a little louder than was probably necessary and then moved around to the other side. He'd have to pretend like this was no big deal. He had

already given Randall all kinds of satisfaction. So he laughed to himself when he climbed in and then turned on the air. "This good for you two?"

Faith's eyes widened, and Randall smirked.

"Let's see if we can find a good station, something slow and nice, romantic maybe?" He kept his face blank and searched through the stations to the elevator music one. "Perfect. Let me know if you two need something different." He turned to Faith. "Now, where is your first stop?"

Faith's face was a satisfying shade of pink. Decker laughed to himself and avoided making eye contact. Maybe she'd have something to say to him after. But joking about this was making him feel a whole lot better.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Faith kind of wanted to dump water on Decker's head. But she had to hand it to him. He was funny.

And Randall was not able to pull any more of his comments. She knew he was trying to rub Decker wrong. And she was secretly pleased it was working.

But did Randall have an interest in her otherwise? She'd never really thought so before today.

And the possibility made her uncomfortable.

Deliveries had gone really well. She loved to see their faces light up when they answered the door. It had been a rewarding afternoon. She, Decker, and Randall stopped at the last house. It belonged to a sweet older woman who'd been in their town for multiple generations. She opened the door before they even hopped out of the truck. Mrs. Walton waved and stepped out on the porch. "Is that you, Decker?"

He ran around to the other side, grabbing Faith's door before climbing the steps up to see Mrs. Walton.

"Yes it is, ma'am. Faithy's brought you some treats."

"Oh, I always knew you two would get back together." She patted his cheek. "She's a real special lady, Decker."

Glad you finally wised up.”

His mouth dropped open, but he laughed. “Oh, Mrs. Walton, you are so right. She’s more special every day.”

Faith tripped coming up the stairs but caught herself.

Decker hurried to her side, grabbing the box she carried. “You alright there?”

She nodded, a small smile illuminating her face. “I’m real good, Deck.”

Mrs. Walton looked from one to the other and then frowned at something over Decker’s shoulder.

“Now, Mrs. Walton, there’s no need to be unhappy with me.” Randall’s semi-smug tone bristled Decker’s skin.

“What are you doing here with these nice folks?”

Faith gasped. But Decker laughed.

Mrs. Walton winked at him and then shook her head. “I don’t even know how you can show your face around here, knowing how much Mr. Walton would have been unhappy with you taking that job.”

“Now, now, Mrs. Walton. We don’t know if he’d be unhappy. What if he would have wised up himself and seen that change was needed?”

She sighed then waved him closer. “I know, son. I’m mostly just teasing you. You know you’re always welcome here. I used to substitute teach you in the fifth grade. Back then you were the shortest kid in the whole school and sometimes you’d come crying to me.” She clucked. “I could never turn you out, you know that.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate that.”

She waved them all inside. “Come in, come in. I’ve got tea on. I have something y’all might find interesting.”

They followed her in. Faith had expected this lengthened visit, which is why they'd come to her last. She and Decker had a lot of respect for Mrs. Walton. She'd been around as long as his dad, as long as any of the Haws, as long as any of the town members. And she knew more than most about Willow Creek. She lived alone, and visits were a cheerful part of her day. At least that's what she said whenever anyone came.

The house smelled of peppermint and cinnamon. "I've got a new tea to try."

"Smells delicious." Faith followed her into the kitchen, waving Decker and Randall back to the couches.

"I'm really liking this new tea. Now, let's get that tray down, and we need to serve that cake over there, see it?"

Faith smiled. "Yes, ma'am." She gathered everything as directed, busying herself happily in the woman's kitchen until she felt Mrs. Walton's hand on her arm.

"Are you going to sell?" Mrs. Walton's direct question took Faith completely by surprise.

"Well, now, that's the question we're all trying to answer." She paused, maybe she should just be direct with the dear woman. "I think so." She sighed. "I don't have much of a choice."

"I know, you sweet thing. How's your grandpa?"

"Last time I held his hand, he squeezed, at least I thought he did. The nurse at the hospital said sometimes they twitch." Her voice caught, and before she knew it, her lips were trembling. "Oh, I am sorry." Suddenly the tenderness and hope of that moment, dashed by the nurse, struck her.

"Oh that's hard, real hard. One thing I know, if that man is aware at all while you're visiting him, he's trying to let you know how much he cares. That's for certain."

Faith's tears welled up again. And she felt the truth of Mrs. Walton's words. Of course he was. She waved a hand in front of her face. "And now I must regain control."

"Cry it out. You're with friends."

"It's true. I am." She lifted the tray. "Are you gonna sell?"

"I'm sure I will. Who wants to live next door to a movie theater?"

She shook her head. "Not me."

"But I'm going to hold out as long as possible just to worry that Randall."

Faith laughed. "I support that."

"Now you go on. I've got to grab something."

Faith moved out toward the family room where Decker and Randall had situated themselves.

Randall rested a leg on his knee. "She's going to sell."

Decker nodded, not wanting to give him the pleasure of asking more about it. His jaw twitched. Bless dear Deck. He was really holding it together, and today must have been a rough day.

"Her kids all want her to sell. And her house and property is next to where the new movie theater is going up. It's not a residential place over here."

Faith felt a sick feeling rise in her gut. This whole beautiful stretch of land, a movie theater? A strip mall? Mrs. Walton was right. Faith couldn't even imagine it. She looked out over the green fields, lined with white picket fences. The Waltons had been horse people. Mr. Walton had

created the most talked about horse breeding program in the area. Walton horses were champions. But they were mostly gone now except for a slew of older winners that Mr. Walton had promised could live out their days in retirement.

Mrs. Walton joined Faith at her side. She pointed out to the fields. "You looking for Candy Striper?"

Decker turned in the direction she pointed. "Where is that rascal?"

"He finally went home to our Lord, after all those years of winning and building up the Walton name, he left this good earth to be with our maker." She rested a hand on her heart. "He lived a good life."

"Oh absolutely. Candy Striper is a legend."

She clucked. "Not just that. You know the work he did here with the children."

"Yes, he was a real gentlemen when he needed to be, wasn't he?"

"What will the program do without him?" Faith set the pitcher and tray down on the table.

"Oh, I'm sure they'll find some others. Those horses out there could do it, but nobody is as gentle and trustworthy as our Candy Striper came to be." She sat and pulled a thick album onto her lap. "While Faith pours you some tea, I'm going to find the pictures you need to see."

They sat together, their threesome more comfortable now that they'd spent the better part of the afternoon delivering treats to the citizens of Willow Creek.

Mrs. Walton had partnered with a local program that used horses for therapy. It was helping children and making great strides in their development.

Faith shook her head. This was all too much sometimes. Couldn't they have all that was good about Willow Creek without the town going bankrupt?

"You alright?" Decker scooted closer on their shared couch and his mumbled question sent a wave of comfort through her. Sometimes it was helpful just to be seen.

"I don't know." She shrugged.

He reached for her hand. And the gesture felt like old times and new times mixed in one. She clung to the familiarity and thrilled at the new potential.

Randall eyed the two of them but didn't say anything.

"I wanted to show you these pictures." Mrs. Walton opened up a thick picture album.

Everyone leaned toward her.

"Here are the original settlers." She pointed. "There's Dawson, Haws, Walton, and..." She pointed a finger at Randall. "McKinney."

Randall snorted. "Didn't really work out for the McKinneys though, did it?"

"I don't know. I think it might have worked out how it was supposed to in the end. But most people don't know your family was right there in the beginning."

"I'm pretty sure my dad likes it that way."

"What would you like?" Mrs. Walton watched him with a clarity and intensity she didn't often see in the woman.

But Randall didn't seem disturbed by her direct questions. He brushed something off his pant leg and then he rotated his shoulders. "I think it's time for Willow Creek residents to do what the McKinneys did. Sell the land. Use

the funds in their families. Take this chance while it's good so we don't lose the town forever."

She waved her hand. "Tosh. That's your sales pitch. What do you, Randall McKinney, want?"

He sighed, his mouth working and his face pained for a moment before it cleared. "I think I want a condo on the beach in Florida." He grinned.

Mrs. Walton studied him for a moment more and then nodded. Was she going to give up? Let Randall avoid her questions? Faith frowned. "Just like that?"

"What do you mean, just like that?"

"You're not even going to look back? You're selling it all?"

"What's left of it. The McKinneys sold out long ago. But if we hadn't, there would be no school. No stadium. No government buildings. When your land abuts government property, sometimes you don't have a choice, but the town needed those things, didn't we? No one complained when the McKinneys were the ones to sacrifice."

And Faith began to understand him better.

"So all this talk of selling the land. This is just a grand revenge tactic." Decker's muscles seemed to enlarge every time he talked to Randall.

Faith shook her head. "No, not at all, Deck. Surely you can see he's just moving on. But I'm sure it was hard when it happened." She looked from one to the other. But both seemed stubbornly unwilling to yield any kind of goodwill.

Mrs. Walton patted his hand. "I felt it. I cried with your grandma about the sale. I know how much the McKinneys gave to this town."

He nodded, once, then stood. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Walton, Faith..." His eyes passed over Decker. "But I need to finish my work this afternoon. Is there a way I could talk someone into driving me into town?"

Decker nodded and stood. "We can all go." He leaned forward to kiss Mrs. Walton on the cheek. "It was good to see you."

"Oh, you too. Thank you for dropping by."

She walked them all to the door, and Faith couldn't shake the unsettled feeling that had joined them.

As soon as they were in the truck, she turned to Randall. "I'm sorry for all that your family had to sacrifice. I never really thought about it."

"Not many did, honestly." He shrugged. "But at this point, it doesn't really matter to us. We've moved on. We see the progress as a good thing. And the rest of y'all should too."

Decker tensed. His hands gripped the steering wheel, but he said nothing.

They drove in silence for a few more blocks.

"The town fair will be fun, the rodeo. Are you gonna ride?"

Randall had wrestled steer back in high school and college.

"Nah, I'm in charge of concessions." He laughed. "There isn't enough money in the world that would get me out there with a steer again."

"That's fair." Faith nodded.

When they pulled back into Faith's driveway, Randall hurried away, climbed into his car, and drove off without

much of a goodbye.

Faith watched him until his car disappeared, and when she turned back to Decker, he was watching her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“So, you and Randall?” He came to stand beside her, leaning up against his truck.

But she apparently refused to have this conversation. She swatted him on the arm and ran toward her stables. “Last one has to ride Piggly Wiggly!”

He tore after her. “Not on your life!”

She laughed. And he ran faster.

They arrived together at the barn door, his breath coming in deeper gasps than he thought their short sprint merited.

But he shook his head. “I’m not riding that piece of stubborn animal.”

Her laugh filled the barn as they entered. “Fine. But I’m riding Electric.”

“As you should. You were made for that horse.”

“I love her.” Faith’s expression told him just how much. He knew her parents had bought the horse. She was getting older but still had some excellent years left in her. “You can ride Thunder.”

“Good choice.” They both walked to the tack room, chose their favorite saddles, and got the horses ready.

When they were up on the animals and riding out across the pasture, Faith finally brought up Randall. “You were funny with him. I was biting my tongue to keep from laughing.”

Chagrined, he dipped his head. “Kind words for my immaturity rearing its head.”

“Well, I did notice some of the same from Randall.” She frowned.

“I know it’s none of my business. It really isn’t. But is there something there, with you and Randall?”

She sighed, and the conflicted look on her face was not comforting to Decker in the slightest. “No.”

He waited without feeling any relief at all. There was more to this story.

“But he’s been here for me, for a long time, and I think he’s getting such a bad break right now. He’s been good to me...” She bit her lip. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“You don’t owe him anything.”

“No, but I sort of do.” She shrugged. “I don’t owe him a relationship, but I do owe him some kindness, some loyalty, some gratitude?” She nodded. “And you were terrible.”

“He was terrible too.”

“Yes.” She laughed. “Mrs. Walton was worst of all.”

“That woman has my undying gratitude.” Decker was funnier than he deserved to be right now, but she seemed to be eating it up, so he kept at it.

“But her point was important at the end. Did you hear that bit?” She bumped his arm.

"The part about how we were all first settlers? The part that Randall shot down immediately?"

"Yeah, that part."

He tried to exhale all of his tension. "I guess we really are gonna have to sell."

"I think so." She nudged Electric to a trot. "But maybe not. Who knows what will happen at the Willow Creek Fair."

He kept pace at her side. "Did we tell you we're doing a benefit rodeo this weekend?"

"Grace texted me about it."

"Good. I'll be roping. All the guys are doing something. You coming?"

"Is it important to you?"

"Well, yeah. I don't know what to do in a rodeo without you in the stands."

"Right. You didn't even see me before."

"Of course I did. You missed one."

"What?"

"You only missed one. Mesquite. And I totally blew my whole event wondering where you were."

She gasped. "I didn't know. I'm sorry! I didn't even know you noticed."

He shook his head. "I really have a lot to make up for, don't I?"

"I don't know. Maybe just start from here and not worry about the past. We had a good time, didn't we?"

"The best."

"Well, then." Her smile grew. "There's only one thing to do."

"What's—"

She took off on her horse, tearing across the pasture.

“Oh no you don’t!” He shouted after her, but her laugh just floated past on the wind. She was going to cream him in this impromptu race, and there was nothing he could do about it.

The sky was bright blue. The clouds sparse. One rested up on the horizon, a long stretch of feathery white. He rode across the pasture towards it, but it only grew smaller in his sights. They seemed so close, but the truth of their great distance became more real the longer he rode. But it stayed in sight. And that was kind of important, he thought. Faith rode up and over the next rounded horizon. He was bound and determined that he and Thunder were going to give Electric and Faith at least a good showing.

They tore out across the pastures, and his heart ached with the joy of so much beauty all around them. People just did not understand. When your family was the original settler of a place, when you had owned and cultivated a land for generations, so that it was a part of your identity, the land stirred emotion. It was a part of you. It felt like a connection to those who had passed. It was a connection to his dad.

Every step across the hills in front of him, the Dawson land that stretched almost to the feathery cloud, or at least appeared to, was his father’s place. His feet had walked those hills, his hands worked those crops. His animals, his horses traveled over the whole of it. If they were to give away the land, they’d be losing some of Dad.

He blinked back sudden tears.

And then to watch it be destroyed with bulldozers to be subdivided and filled with people who would have no appreciation for the man who had originally owned it. He sat up in his saddle, letting the wind rush all around him. He had to let this go. They would likely have to sell. Faithy had to sell. The Waltons had to sell. They would all sell.

Faith beat him to the fence that divided their properties, but instead of stopping, she sailed over it as if she were flying, and he followed right after.

She raced along the top of their land up toward the ridge. And he shouted in joy. There was nothing better than following a beautiful woman across the pasture.

And she looked dang good on a horse.

They tore up the side of the hill, leapt over logs, and eventually rode up over the top of the ridge. And there she stopped.

He joined her, out of breath. They sat on their horses facing the property all around them. Everywhere they looked was either Dawson or Haws land. And he loved every bit of it.

Then she surprised him. With tear-filled eyes, she turned and said, "They want me to turn off the machines for Grandpa."

His heart shuttered and then raced, then stuttered again. No. Not Grandpa. "Wait, what! You can't do that!" The words came out just like his reaction to her selling the land. He hung his head, shaking it. "I'm sorry. Of course you are going to have to make some tough decisions there. It seems soon though, right?"

“One month. They said that this is the time when they start preparing family members. The hospital said the likelihood of people recovering goes down after this week. They said all kinds of things about statistics, and all I wanted to say was that Grandpa was not a number.” She choked on that last bit and looked away. “When I look at all this, do you know what I think?”

Dawson shook his head. She obviously had very different thoughts about all of this than he did.

“I think he will probably never see it again.”

“I know what he’d say if he were to see it again.”

She sniffed.

“He’d look in that direction and he’d say, ‘That land needs to be rotated. Why are you still planting alfalfa on the high ground hills?’ ” Decker laughed.

“True. And then he’d point down by my cows and say, ‘Those animals need to be up higher. This time of year they’ll get fattest with that grass up top.’ ” She smiled. “I can hear him in my mind.”

“Me too.” Decker reached over and squeezed her hand for a moment. “He stepped in to help Maverick when father died. He kept the Dawson ranch afloat while we worked out all sorts of difficulties. Every one of us is gonna miss him.”

She nodded. “Do you...Do you think he’ll wake up?”

Decker’s heart clenched, and he wanted more than anything to not have to answer that question, but Faith was desperate for something, anything, to cling to. He didn’t know what to say. “Oh wow, Faith. I just don’t know. I don’t think that’s an answer we can get by ourselves.” Then his scripture study came to mind. “But I do know that the Lord

is always reaching out to us. He is there, helping, holding. No matter what, He is there.”

“His hand is stretched out still.” She nodded. “But how? Where is He? I don’t have the answers I need right now.”

Decker studied her a moment more. “Well, He brought us together.”

She sighed.

“And maybe.” Decker gritted his teeth. “Maybe he brought the developer.”

She nodded. “Maybe. I ask myself that all the time.”

“And we’re here. We’re healthy right now.”

“But there’s no guarantee of that, is there? There’s nowhere that says if you’re a good person, or if God loves you enough, He’s gonna take away your problems.”

“No, that’s true.” Decker really scrambled for a moment. He wasn’t sure what to tell her, because she was right. They had trials. They might get worse ones. When you looked at it like that, why pray at all? Then his mama’s sweet face came into his mind. And he remembered her words. “But I know He hears us.”

She sniffed.

“And He loves us. He will show us that. We will feel it.”

When she didn’t respond, he added. “And He really does make things work out for our good.”

She looked away.

“Sometimes our good looks pretty hard on the outside. But it has lots of goodness on the inside. Like your éclairs.”

She snorted.

He nudged her. “Sorry. We’re trying to be serious here.”

“My éclairs are not tough on the outside.”

The he laughed. "No, you're right. I'm sorry. They're light and fluffy. Is that what they're supposed to be?"

"Oh stop. Yes. They're fluffy and tasty and full of delicious cream on the inside."

"Right. That's the part I'm talking about. He makes it okay. Whatever we have to deal with, he makes it okay. And sometimes, there's a sweetness there that we see right away."

She swallowed and nodded. "And sometimes not, but He does work things out for our good." She seemed more sure of the idea.

"I believe that. But I don't know about your grandpa. If we wait just a few weeks more, one day more, one hour more, will it be enough for him to open his eyes and talk to us?"

She wilted and fell forward on the horse, wrapping her arms around the front of Electric. It couldn't have been too comfortable over the top of the saddle horn, but she stayed there.

Then he hopped down and tugged at her to come down with him. "Come here, you."

She slid off and fell into his arms. "I'm sorry I'm so pathetic. It's just so much. And riding across the land just now, thinking about Grandpa, it was more than I could do."

"You got me. I'm here." He pulled her close and held her tight. "I wish you didn't have to even think about something like this."

"Me neither."

They stood like that for a long time. The breeze felt comforting. It carried smells and memories and thoughts of

his house and hers, mingling together around them. Then he nudged her. "Hey."

She looked up into his face. Her tears were dried. And she seemed at peace. "Let's talk about this. What do we know about people who wake up? 'Cause there's no reason why he can't be the miracle, right?"

"True, but..."

"I mean, we pray, we sit by him, read him his favorite books, tell him problems to solve, get him actively thinking again..." She didn't seem to be energized by any of his ideas.

She just shook her head. "I think that's all great, but I sort of think this might be it." She shuddered as a lingering sob trembled through her, but then she smiled. "I feel more peaceful than I have in a long time."

He nodded. "But we don't know for sure, right?"

"No, but I think I'd like to go see him."

"Can I come?"

She nodded. "I'd like that."

He picked her up, right at her hips, and set her up on her horse.

She laughed. "I forgot how easy it is for you to do that." Her cheeks blushed with an adorable charm. He stood there, just looking at her for a moment.

"You want me to help you up on yours?"

Then he laughed. "Uh, no." He leapt up on Thunder, and they both took the pasture at a run back to the Haws house.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The visit with Grandpa was comforting. He didn't move. He didn't speak. He didn't even squeeze her hand. But seeing him there, knowing he was fine, knowing she had time to make her decisions, helped.

And Deck was the best. He obviously loved her grandpa. He stayed at her side until she was ready to go home. And he said all the right things, and some awkward ones. She smiled.

When he'd dropped her off at home, he left her at the doorstep, and for one moment, she thought for sure he was thinking about kissing her, like they'd been on a date. But she just couldn't have that day be their first kiss. It was too full of everything else, and she wanted their kiss to mean something.

So she'd gone in for the awkward hug and escaped inside her house, closing the door as soon as possible.

Thinking about it now, on the way to the benefit rodeo, made her laugh.

"What?" Grace was in the truck with her. Bailey had gone somewhere, something about having meetings to set

up the benefit concert for the Willow Creek Fair, but Grace was not missing this rodeo.

Faith was not about to tell her she was thinking about kissing Decker. “Nothing. I guess I was just thinking about barrel racing.”

“You gonna ride today?”

She grinned wider. “Yes, I am.”

Grace squealed. “I knew it! I’m so excited!”

“Well, I’m glad you are, because I haven’t told anyone yet, and I’m kind of nervous to be honest, but more than anything I’m just happy.” Electric was already at the rodeo grounds. She was gonna be on her horse, riding in a rodeo again. And for some reason, that made everything else better for just a little while.

“Are you gonna win?”

Faith grinned again. “Now, I just don’t know. But either way, I’m happy to be up on my horse, rounding those barrels.”

“Do you think I could start barrel racing?”

“If you want to. You’re in the right family.” Faith laughed.

“That’s true. Did you know I won a blue ribbon at my first rodeo?”

“Did you! That’s incredible!”

“Me and Nash the pig took first place in our 4-H competition.”

“I think I heard that, and of course the ribbon is still up there above Nash’s pen.”

“He’s proud of it.”

“He should be. It’s kept him alive all these years.”

Grace smiled, but a slight worry crossed her eyes, and Faith regretted teasing her. "Really, Grace. That pig is not going anywhere. Mama won't allow it, and I don't think your dad will either."

She brightened and nodded. "That's right. We all love Nash."

They pulled into the rodeo grounds early. Faith had things to do to prepare. "Hey, Grace, do you want to help me braid Electric's mane?"

"Oh totally!"

"Thank you, I've got some ribbons and things in her stall. And come to think of it, we never had that talk we were supposed to on Sunday."

They made their way to Electric's stall, and Grace told her about her life. Faith had forgotten how complicated a middle schooler's life could be. They laughed and hugged, and Faith stayed as long as she could. But as soon as Grace was working on the mane and tail, Faith went to change into her costume and tried to walk off her nervous energy. Something about the fringe hanging from her arms, the bright blue of her shirt, and the hat that fit just right on her head made her happy. She might have even thrown in a bit of swagger. She was back. The rodeo was going on, and she'd be out in the arena. Her smile grew. For a moment, it was like all of the worries in her life hit the pause button, and she was ready to linger here in this quiet for a time.

Except it wasn't quiet, and that was something else perfectly wonderful about it. People were talking and shouting. Animals were being noisy, the announcer was testing the microphone, and the music was blaring through

the place. No, the rodeo wasn't quiet. It was beautifully comforting and loud. And the smells. She breathed in deeply. Cotton candy. Popcorn. Turkey legs. The smells were filling her with happiness. And so much nostalgia. She couldn't help it. She loved the whole place.

"Is that the happiest thing I've seen in a long time?" Nash Dawson's voice called to her from somewhere up ahead.

She squinted into the darkness. "Nash?"

"It is! It's Faith Haws looking like she wants to compete in a rodeo." He dipped his hat to her and stepped closer into the light.

"I'm glad to see you! What have you been up to?"

"Oh, I've been around. Just coming back into town for this."

"You gonna ride?"

"Of course. It's Dawson all hands on deck, did you hear?"

"I think I heard that, yes. We've got some orphans to help."

"And a town to save." He watched her. "Though we might be saving a new kind of Willow Creek for the future."

"That's probably true. At least as far as Decker and I can figure. We don't see another way."

"He hasn't said as much to Mav. If you were to spend time at our house, you would think Maverick is trying to ruin our lives and Decker is trying to save us. Neither is speaking much to the other."

"Ah, well, that's just silly talk."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

"And where do you fit in that scenario? Who is ruining whose life?"

"Nah, that's where they have it all wrong. We're in this together. And I think we can have it all."

His words made good sense to Faith; they were the words she hoped were true all this time. "Well now, you gonna be roping to save the town or are you riding?"

"Today? Riding. They needed someone on bareback."

"Whoa. You done that much?"

"Now and then. Mama doesn't like it. But I can hold my own, and at this point, we need someone, a Dawson, to win the bareback competition."

"Sounds like you're in the perfect event then, Nash Dawson."

"Yes, ma'am." He dipped his hat. "Can I walk you somewhere?"

"Oh no, I'm good, just getting out some jitters."

"You're gonna be beautiful."

"Thank you." That was rather nice of Nash.

"There's nothing better than a woman and her horse tearing it up in the middle of the arena."

"You trying to butter up Faith so you can get some of her pies? Or are you after something else over here, little brother?" Decker stepped around the corner, his smile big and his hat bigger.

"Oh, I'm just getting her ready for you. And I'm always open for pie." He winked. "Good to see you again, Faithy."

"You too, Nash."

Decker surprised her by pulling her into his arms, close, like he might kiss her without even thinking about it. "You

are a beautiful woman.”

“Thank you.” She laughed. “Where did that come from?”

“I’m just not sure I’ve told you enough. And seeing you like this. Wow, you’re doing something to this rodeo man.”

“Oh yeah? And what am I doing?”

“Making me forget why I’m here, for one.” He pulled her closer. “It’s good to see you.”

“Isn’t this fun! Everyone back, ready to ride. I’m really excited. Is Maverick gonna announce or ride?”

“I think he’s doing both, with Randall taking over for the bull riding event.”

“Oh, that’s gonna be something.”

“We made him promise not to remind anyone that selling Willow Creek land is the best idea.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

He reached for her hand. “You walking off the jitters?”

“How did you know?”

“It’s what you do. You’ve been doing it for years. Shall we walk your route?”

“My route?”

“Sure. You walk along behind all the stalls, along the animal pens, past the cotton candy without ever buying any, and then back.”

“Well, alright then. Sounds like you know where to lead me.”

They talked of nothing and everything, and Faith felt like she was back in high school for a brief moment. And then they heard the music and the announcer hyping the crowd, and they knew it was time to find their place with the family until their events.

Faith went to go sit by Grace. Mama Dawson was there as well. "Oh, honey, I'm so happy to see you. Grace tells me you're riding!"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm excited too. It's gonna be the most amazing day I've had in a long time. Even if I knock over a barrel."

"Oh, you won't. You're too good for that." Grace seemed certain. And Faith appreciated her confidence.

Then Nash came and sat on Faith's other side. "Faithy."

"Nash."

The music started for the national anthem, and everyone stood. Faith put her hand on her heart. One of the students from Willow Creek High sang the words while everyone reverently watched the flag. Then Maverick's voice filled the arena. "Welcome to the Willow Creek benefit rodeo!"

Everyone cheered and screamed like this was the best thing to ever happen to them.

"We'd like to offer a special thank you to our sponsors. We have a new platinum line up, led by Newhope Developing."

The crowd grew more subdued, but then Maverick announced Sam's Burgers and Mabel's Donuts, and everyone went crazy again.

Mama Dawson squeezed her hand, and Faith leaned over with an arm across her shoulders.

"We love you, Faithy Haws. Don't you forget that."

The words to the scripture came back into her mind. *His hand is stretched out still.*

"Love you too, Mrs. Dawson."

She hesitated for a moment, but when the parade started, she knew they had some time before the first event. "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

She turned her kind, wise eyes on Faith, sending a wave of yearning for her own mother through her. Faith cleared her throat and commanded her mouth not to waver. "This is kind of deep." She leaned closer. "But I know we believe God is always watching out for us, and I know He must be. I've been seeing blessings in all kinds of places, but how do you keep believing that? How do you keep pushing forward when there is so much going on that is hard right now?"

Mrs. Dawson patted her hand, and to Faith's surprise, the great matriarch's eyes filled with tears. "Well now, life isn't as easy as we all thought it would be, is it?"

Faith laughed. "No. I never thought I'd be orphaned at my age without even my grandpa to talk to." She meant for the words to ease her pain, to keep things light, but her voice caught, and then tears filled her eyes. "I know God's there, but why do so many hard things have to happen?"

"Oh, my dear Faith. You know, we didn't plan on Mr. Dawson leaving us so soon either. The boys and I, we planned on a grand retirement for the big man." She shook her head. "And I'll tell you what, Maverick didn't plan on Bailey leaving him on their first wedding day. Grace didn't know, bless her heart, that she was being born into some tough beginnings. Old Mrs. Walton didn't plan on being widowed and nearly kicked off her land." She sighed. "There's a lot of hardship going on in just about every home."

"So how does everyone keep on believing?"

“Same way you do. We don’t believe in a God that paves our way with gold streets and easy paths. The God we believe in never promised that life would be easy. In fact, the very life and death of Jesus would indicate that bearing His cross with Him would be a challenge sometimes.”

Faith nodded. “But then what is the promise for those who believe? I just always thought we would be blessed.”

“Oh, my darling, we are. Look around. See the blessings. And the biggest one of all happens right here.” She pressed her heart as though something precious resided inside. “We can feel his love, his grace, joy, peace. No matter what is going on all around us, this feeling right here can stay with us.”

Faith nodded, a certain peace returning to her. “Yes, I have felt that.” She wished it would stay, but she would try to see God in her life more. She would try to notice.

“And I’ll share a secret with you.” Mrs. Dawson winked. “If you’re ever feeling far away from Jesus, and you’re not sure how to get that feeling back again, just start thanking Him. Open your mouth in praise and thanks and don’t stop until the love returns.”

Her eyes filled with a different kind of tears, and a surety filled Faith while listening to Mrs. Dawson. “He is good isn’t He?”

“Yes, the very best.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Decker brushed down his horse. “Hey, bud. We’re gonna ride again. You ready for this?”

Champ’s responding nicker made Decker smile. “You’re a good boy.”

His event wasn’t up for a while—they were swapping around the typical order of events—and he wanted to make sure he saw Faith. There was something incredible about that woman. She surprised him all the time with even more strength and character and goodness. He was pretty sure, at this point, he’d never find another woman like Faithy Haws.

But as much as he wanted her in his life, he wasn’t so sure she was determined to have him in hers. She seemed interested, sure. But she seemed about as equally interested in everything else they were dealing with. Which was understandable. There was some big stuff going on right now.

He needed to somehow take things to the next level.

Maverick called out into the microphone. “And now, for the event everyone has been waiting for, barrel racing,

featuring a return to the arena by our own Faith Haws."

The crowd went crazy, and Decker ran to the opening onto the arena. He stood up on the bottom rail of a chute and got a clear view.

She was on the opposite side of the arena. He knew she sat on Electric in the shadows beyond his sight. On the signal, she came racing out into the light. Her face had a look of pure concentrated joy, so much so that he burst out laughing. "You go, Faithy!" He waved his hat in the air.

The crowd cheered her on, but he knew she couldn't hear one bit of it. When you're out there, everything was strangely quiet.

They raced to the first barrel, hugged it as tight as they could, raced around to the second and back again. Then off she went, flying, back to where she'd started. Her times flashed up on top.

"Wow! Faith has done it again! Should we tell her that if this were a real competition rodeo, she'd have broken her own record?"

The crowd cheered again.

"Congratulations, Faith Haws." Maverick then moved on to announcing the next rider. But Decker just grinned and returned to Champ. They'd best be heading down to the other side where they'd be launching out onto the soft sand after a calf.

Event after event, Decker smiled through it all. And when he finished roping his calves, he circled twice around the inside of the arena just to look at Faith. The last time, he dipped his head close to where they sat in the stands.

She blew him a kiss that he pretended to catch, and then he yelped to the crowd, waving his hat around in the air. Life was good in the small pause going on around them.

Faith met him at Champ's stall. She must have took off running to get there. "That was some riding, cowboy."

"I could say the same about you, record breaker." He closed the stall door behind Champ, watching her.

"I wish we could do that every day." She sighed.

He took her hand, though he wanted to drag her back in with Champ and kiss her soundly. He tried to be casual. "I could get used to this real quick."

"Which part?"

He winked. "The part where we ride and then you're here waiting for me."

"I'll admit, that sounds real nice."

They walked toward their seats, taking their time. "You know, I don't think I've been on a date with a championship barrel racer before."

"Oh, you haven't?"

"No, I haven't. Do you know how I could rectify that situation?"

"I happen to know one..."

"As it turns out, so do I." He stopped in front of her. "Faithy Haws, it's about time I tried to win you over. Will you let me try? Starting Saturday night?"

She stepped closer, her smile growing. "You have your work cut out for you, Mr. Decker Dawson."

"I'm not afraid of a little work."

"Mostly 'cause it took you so long to try." She winked. "But I'm free Saturday, so let's move from there."

He dipped his hat. "Saturday it is. I'll come at eight in the morning."

"What on earth? Eight?"

"Well, if you're giving me the day, I want to make use of it."

She laughed. "Okay then. I'll be ready."

Two days later, Decker made his way to the Haws homestead, his mind going through everything over and over again.

The rodeo events had been fun. They brought on a wave of nostalgia. But to Decker, they were a reminder of days past, not future days. Nash was literally jumping in his boots to get back out there competing. But not Deck. If he was jumping in his boots for anything, it was to take them off, don a suit and tie, and work in New York City for a while.

But he knew that dream was for another time. His family needed him. They needed to figure out the future, make a plan, and move forward. Once that was taken care of, maybe he could pursue another direction.

His worry now was could he convince Faith to come with him?

He turned down her drive. He didn't know the answer to that question. But he did know that if he wanted to have Faith in his life, he had to start acting like it.

She stood on the porch in a sundress, waiting for him.

The yellow of her dress, her hair shining in the sun, her big smile had him running from his truck. "Hello, beautiful."

He swooped her up into his arms and spun her around. "You ready for some fun?"

"You know it!" She clung to his neck as he spun. And then he put her down. "We're gonna need a swimsuit for some of this, maybe. And those cute little jean shorts you have."

"The ones I wore in high school?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yep."

"You're lucky I still have those." She turned back to the house. "Come on in. Anything else you want me to grab?"

"Nope, that's it. Oh, maybe a towel."

"Gotcha."

Her house was still their old family home. She had kept the family pictures up, the decorations her mother had used, even the old granny crochet blanket on a rocking chair in the corner. Decker wondered if it might do her some good to start over, to renovate...or go to New York. He swallowed, nervous about the whole idea. Of course, he wouldn't be bringing it up any time soon.

She came back out with her bag apparently even more packed.

He reached for it. "We're set. You ready for the most epic date of your life?"

"I am."

"Actually, how about I set the bar a little lower. You ready for a fun day?"

She laughed. "Deck, I think I'd have fun no matter what we did together."

"And I think you're right. So as part of this date, we are going to relive some of the crazy random things we've done."

But this time, we're gonna do it right."

She nodded. "I like the sound of this."

He opened the door to his truck. "First stop, farmer's market to get us our picnic."

"Oh, yum. Does your mama have any pies out there?"

"Yes, she does."

"Perfect."

"Then we're gonna hike to the swimming hole."

She laughed. "Excellent. Did you hear someone put in a better rope swing up there?"

"I did in fact know that."

"Wait, did you do it?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny such activity."

He ran around the truck and hopped in himself. "I say we grab a couple sandwiches from Joe's truck stop and a Dawson pie and some fruit from the Hanson orchard."

"Sounds good to me." She situated herself on the seat by the window, but he shook his head. "Nope. That will not do."

"What?" She paused, about to buckle her seatbelt.

"You need to move a little closer, I think." He patted the seat beside him.

Her face colored a delicious pink. "Okay." Then she scooted close and buckled herself in the center seat of his truck bench.

"That's more like it. This is what I'm talking about, doing things right." He put an arm across her shoulders and snuggled her in as close as he could. "This okay?"

"This is great." She leaned her head on his shoulder, and he thought that the date couldn't get better than that moment, but he hoped it would.

They stopped at the fairgrounds, where vendors were all set up and selling foods, crafts, and garden-fresh vegetables. "Crowds are light today."

"It's still early."

"You saying not everyone wakes up at eight in the morning on a Saturday?"

"Oh, you know they do. They are all probably still doing chores, though."

"Good point."

They hurried to Joe's to get the sandwiches, and then Grace called to them. She sat at her own booth, surrounded by pieces of pottery.

"Grace?" Faith ran over to her. "Are you selling your pottery now?"

"First time at the farmer's market. I'm just trying it out. If people like it, I can start marketing my online shop."

"This is incredible. Let's see what you have here." Faith picked up the first piece.

And Decker, watching the pleased glow on Grace's face, wanted to kiss Faith right there.

Faith looked at piece after piece, complimenting glazes and shapes and sizes until Decker thought his eyes might cross, but finally she lifted a bowl. "This is the one. Can I buy this one?"

"Yes, you can. I can bring it home if you like, and you can pick it up tomorrow at Sunday dinner."

"Perfect." Her small smile made Decker happy, and he hoped it meant she was pleased to be an automatic addition to Dawson Sunday dinners.

They grabbed the pie, Mama Dawson as happy as she ever was, and then a bag of peaches. "Okay, let's go. If we stay here any longer, we're gonna be hiking in the hot sun."

"Gotcha." Faith paused. "But wait, just one more thing."

He followed her, shaking his head, but loving every minute while she examined a whole row of t-shirts and finally came away with two. "How about these?"

She held up matching shirts that said, "This ain't my first rodeo."

He laughed. "Those for us?"

"Of course! If we want this to be as epic as you say, at some point we have to have matching shirts."

"You got it."

They drove up to the trailhead. "I heard the water's really high, so we might have some pretty falls as well up there." He parked, and no one else was at the trailhead. A good sign. He shifted the food into his backpack, Faith pulled her shorts on under her skirt, changing into her hiking outfit. Once the skirt was off, she looked ready to try out the rope swing as well.

The trail started wide and easy, and he knew it would stay that way for much of the walk.

"So, tell me, Faith. What is your favorite memory of high school?"

She looked back over her shoulder at him then walked a moment without answering. When he thought she was going to ignore the question altogether, she finally said. "I think my answer has changed over time. At graduation, I would have said senior prom for sure."

He grinned. "That was a dang good time. I'll give you that."

"But now, I think I'd have to say I really loved all the 4-H stuff and the service projects. Remember when we helped Mrs. Walton start her therapy with horses program? That was so wonderful. Those kids. I've never seen happier kids, waving their hands and smiling."

"It's real special when they can't speak, but they're trying to let you know they're having fun. It's the best sort of expression."

"Yes, right now, that is one of my favorite memories."

He thought for a moment. "I have this one image in my head. It's you laughing and clapping in response to Esther, remember her?"

"I do! How could I forget Esther? She was such a joy. And she really responded. I heard the program helped her gain more control over her arms, better than ever before."

"Yes, and she really loved you. The way she would follow what you were doing and tried to respond. You really looked happy, I can see why you would remember it like you do."

"And prom." She grinned. "It's not like prom wasn't special."

"Well, true." He thought for a minute. "There isn't an important high school memory without you in it, honestly. You're a part of them all."

She kicked at a rock. "Too true. No wonder everyone thought we were dating."

"They did, or they sort of knew we eventually would, I guess." He didn't like that for some reason. "Does that make you kind of irritated, like it does me?"

She laughed. "A bit. But no sense in rebelling against something that makes us happy."

He joyed in her response. "The thought of us together makes you happy?"

She turned, studied him, and then nodded. "Yes, it does."

The trail moved further into the trees, and he welcomed the shade. Bushy cedar trees rose up all around them.

"So, what's your favorite high school memory?"

He had hoped she would ask. "That pep rally we emceed."

"What?" She laughed. "The one where you had to get a pie in your face?"

"Well, that part was fine. But the whole thing, it was awesome. We joked together and made everyone laugh. You were amazing out there. Magic. Everyone was eating up your jokes." He had been as amazed with her then as everyone else.

"What about you? They thought you were awesome too."

"Sort of. But really, you made me look good. Thinking about it now, it's so obvious how I'm fine on my own, but you really make me better."

She waved his compliment away. "Oh, I don't know. I think you'd be great no matter what you did."

He wasn't so sure, but he let it go. They crested the final ridge and then followed the path down and around to a water hole fed by a waterfall. "And we're here!" They entered the clearing.

"This is gorgeous! I don't remember the water being this blue."

"It's always been a bit of a mud hole."

"Must be the extra rain or something." The waterfall pounded down into the water, casting a gentle spray over them. Faith knelt down to touch the water. "We going in? It's chilly."

"I will if you will." He pointed up the hill a little bit to a huge tree that draped over everything around it. A live oak that majestically reigned and supported a rope swing. "That rope looks like it's itching to be used."

"That's true." She nodded and slipped off her shoes. "Last one in." Then she took off running up the hill to the tree.

"She always does that," he muttered, but it was yet another thing he loved about this woman. "We go together!" he called out to her.

But she was halfway up the tree already.

When he finally arrived at her side, she turned to him. "How exactly would we do this together?"

He held the rope just above one of the knots. "I hold here. And you, hold up higher, here." He grabbed another knot above. "Then we both jump out off this branch and fly out over the water."

She nodded. "Suddenly I'm nervous."

He laughed. "What! The same Faith who climbs railroad trestles and jumps off bridges is afraid of a little rope swing."

"Alright already. Not afraid, just nervous. I'm not eighteen anymore."

"No, you're not. Mm." He let his eyes travel over her in a flirty way. "You are all woman now, and plenty beautiful to go along with it."

“Oh stop. You’re just trying to get me to jump.”

“I do think it would be fun. Is it working?”

She tugged the rope away from him. “Maybe.” She tested its weight, grabbing the highest knot, and took the branch at a run. “But I’m going by myself.” Then she leapt out, swinging high and long and peaking over the blue of the water. She let go and splashed in.

The rope came sailing back, and he had to lean out with a stick to grab it and bring it back to him. He returned the stick to the place someone had made for it, and then grabbed the rope himself, ran along the branch, and jumped out into the open air. The rope took him to the water as it had Faith, and he dropped in.

The cool water felt brisk enough that he was refreshed and happy to climb out. He shook his head to get the water out of his hair and lifted himself up to sit on the rocks that lined the watering hole.

Faith came and sat beside him. “They have it way better than we did, don’t they?”

“This rope?” He turned to look at it, hanging by a branch so it was reachable for the next people.

“Yeah, remember that frayed thing we used?”

“True. I suppose we could have replaced it any time.” He shrugged.

“Ah yes. Well, then they just have cooler adults in their lives.” She nudged him. “Like you.” She smiled. “I know you put this rope up, Decker Dawson.”

“Oh, you do? And how do you know that?”

“It has your name written all over it.” She dipped her hand and sprinkled water at him. “We gonna eat? I’m

starved now.”

“Yes! Let’s climb up to the ledge.”

There was a perfect space to sit, higher and to the right of the falls. It was out of its spray but with a perfect view of everything. He shouldered the backpack again, and they scrambled up the rocks together.

When they were comfortable, blanket spread and food out, Decker wanted to do something, anything, to turn the conversation to something more meaningful. But his mind went blank.

So they talked of the food, of Mama Dawson’s pie, of Grace’s pottery, of everything but the important things.

She held up a grape. “Can you still catch these?”

“Oh yeah. I will never give up my title.”

“What was it again? Champion grape catcher?”

“Sure, that works.” He opened his mouth. “Come on.”

So she tossed him grape after grape, which he caught no matter how much she tried to trick him.

Then he held up a strawberry. “These though, need to be appreciated one bite at a time.” He leaned closer and held it up to her mouth.

She eyed him for a moment but then took the first bite. “Mm. This is so good.” She reached down for another. “Your turn.”

He opened his mouth, and she pressed the strawberry against his lips; but as soon as he moved to bite it, she took it and popped it in her own mouth instead. “Oops.”

“Oh no you don’t.” He reached for one himself.

But she shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’ll do it this time.” She held it to her own mouth and pretended to eat it but

then just ran it across her lower lip.

His eyes were glued to the softness and the red berry trailing along the pink of her mouth until she lifted it and placed it in his own mouth instead. He immediately grabbed another, took a bite and then ran the redness of the sweet juice along her mouth. She licked her lips.

“Here, let me help you with that.”

“Mm?” She lifted her gorgeous eyes to his.

He touched the berry to her mouth again and then leaned closer to kiss it off, but a loud horn sounded out across the swimming hole. There were shouts and splashing and someone called out, “Hey, is that Deck?”

He groaned. And Faith looked away.

A whole group of teens had come up on some ATVs. They were loud enough to be at a football game for sure.

“Sorry.” He nodded in their direction.

“No, this is great. They’re like the halftime show.”

He grinned. “Totally.” Relieved she was such a good sport, he leaned back on the nice warm rock and ate his sandwich while she narrated the teens’ silly jumps and climbs. Eventually they were both laughing and having almost as much fun as their first kiss might have been.

Almost.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Faith drove over to the Dawsons for another Sunday dinner half wishing she lived there all the time. Her house got lonely. And with all of her family's pictures, evidence of their previous life together, staring at her all the time, she felt less and less comforted and more reminded that this house was not her own anymore. It belonged to a time past. Especially with Grandpa in the hospital and her thoughts consumed by selling, she felt more and more like she needed to move on. But that was silly, she reminded herself; of course the house would always be hers. She was just going to sell off some of the extra land.

She pulled into the Dawson driveway. Their house was huge, and Mama Dawson had kept it updated. Everything looked new or mended and lovely. The flowers along the front added to the charm. It was comfortable and homey. Faith basically loved the place. She gathered the side dishes she'd brought from the back seat. The salads and the cake were some of her best. She loved baking and didn't have much of an opportunity unless she created one or offered to bring something when she was invited somewhere.

Decker met her on the porch. "Faithy Haws, you just made my day. Let's get you and those fixin's in this house." He relieved her of both salads and the cake and held open the door with his foot. "Come on in, Faithy Haws."

"Are you ever gonna stop calling me that?"

"Do you want me to?"

"No." She responded quickly, maybe too quickly, but she didn't want to lose her nickname. "I like it."

"Then it stays."

"Faithy!" Grace shouted as she ran forward to give her a hug.

"It sticks." She hugged Grace back.

Everyone was in town. There were no video chat attendees today. She didn't imagine there were often days when the boys would forego the Sunday meal.

Faith dug in and helped get everything out on the table and the sideboard, and soon she was sitting next to Decker at the large Dawson table, ready for someone to bless the food.

Dylan was smiling at her, Mav too, but Nash was having some kind of argument with Grace. "Dude, you're just gonna have to stick around long enough to see for yourself."

They stopped when they realized everyone could hear them. And Faith wondered just what was going on there.

But then Mama sat down. "It's so good to see everyone. Great to see you, Faithy. I trust all is well with you?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Any change with your grandfather?"

"No, none."

She nodded. "I know he was so proud of who you have become, and he would be so proud of all that you're doing here. You working the land, running your house, holding down a job, all on your own." Her smiling eyes showed so much approval that Faith was warmed to her toes. "And you Dawsons, your father would be so proud of each one of you men and of the women in your lives. I hope you know I am as well. The crops are coming. The cattle are brought in on time. The rodeo is bringing in sponsorship opportunities as well as extra cash flow. And we all know the great work Decker has done with our books."

Decker smiled, surprised it was even mentioned, but pleased he'd done something to help out.

"Maverick has brought us together and led us as I know your father would want. We miss him, but he's here. I see your father in each one of you and on the land all around us. Let us pray." She reached for the hands of Bailey and Kate, who sat on either side of her. And the rest of those at the table joined hands as well.

Her words were quick and straightforward and important. "Bless us with knowledge to know how to move forward. Bless us with peace in our town and family to do so with love and understanding. Bless this land. Bless this family and all those associated with us. Bless our guests, that Faith will always feel welcome here." And her list of thank-you's was even longer. Mama Dawson knew how to praise the Lord and to thank Him, and Faith learned a thing or two from her every time she visited.

When she was finished, Nash got them started as he usually did. "Now, after all those words, a man might just

pass away from hunger. Could someone pass the ham down here to get us started?"

Everyone laughed. And food started flowing and happy conversation as well.

Decker reached for her hand and squeezed it. "I'm happy you're here."

"Me too."

He rested his arm across her chair and kept on eating, but every now and then his fingers would brush against her neck or shoulder, sending bolts of awareness and delicious sensations through her. Her side-eye made him laugh, and then she joined in.

He was totally doing this on purpose. And he didn't stop. He got more bold until a finger ran along her neckline and up into her hair, subtle, unseen, but making Faith crazy. A stream of happy shivers followed the track, and the hair on both her arms stood straight up.

"What do you think about that, Faith?" Maverick asked her something, about which she was totally clueless. The whole table looked in her direction. And Decker snorted.

She sat forward, not quite swatting him away, but dislodging his arm. As she looked from one person to another, her mind trying to grasp at what they could possibly be talking about, Decker came to her rescue.

"The zoning would be important to know, naturally."

"Thanks, Deck. We know how you feel about this. Faith is the final Haws. She has our respect, the whole town's respect, and it's going to matter how she feels about all of it."

Grateful to be given at least the context of the conversation, she put a hand on his knee and squeezed her thank-you. "I agree about zoning. I want to have as much say about how the land is used as I can until it's no longer in my possession. I was thinking there is probably a lot we can do with our city ordinances and specific laws we could put in place now that would protect green space, park land, governance of how the land is used, the types of stores, signage, strip malls, liquor stores, big box types, all of it. I think even before any of us sell, we should put these things in place."

The table erupted with excitement and agreement. Faith smiled. She sat back, her hand still on Decker's knee. He had grown strangely still. Her smile grew, and she ran fingers down his kneecap.

His quick swallow empowered her. And she knew that revenge would be sweet. All through dessert she played with his knee, his lower thigh, massaging into his muscle as well as running fingers lightly over his cotton khaki pants. She stretched out her hand and squeezed once, hard, on both sides of his leg. He jumped and dropped his fork.

She snorted, covering her mouth and looking away.

"You okay there, Deck?" Dylan laughed, watching them both too closely.

Faith knew she was beet red, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Decker wiped his mouth. "Fine, why?" His challenging gaze made everyone laugh harder, but they dropped it, thankfully. And Mama Dawson didn't say anything.

Faith breathed out in relief.

Decker leaned over, his mouth brushing her neck as he whispered. "You're killing me, woman. This deserves a walk out to the barn."

She turned to him, their faces close, too close, tantalizingly close, and nodded. "I'd say it was about time."

His eyes caught on fire...with happiness? Desire? And that's all it took. He stood. "Okay, let's help clean up, shall we?"

Everyone stopped talking and looked up at him with varying degrees of surprise.

"Uh, Deck. We're not done yet." Dylan laughed. "You in a particular hurry?" He looked from Faith to his twin and back.

Decker sat back down. "No, we have all night. Sorry."

They kept talking, and Faith couldn't stop laughing.

She took pity on him and said, "What should we do this week?"

His fingers tapped the table, a certain nervous energy she found amusing. But he nodded. "How about we go dancing?"

She smiled. "That's what I'm talking about. I need a good night out."

"Excellent. We can get some dinner, go dancing. Watch the moon rise afterward?" He wiggled his eyebrows, and she shook her head but smiled.

Watching the moon rise was definitely code for a good make out around the Dawson family. And she might just be okay with that. He'd certainly driven her to complete distraction with one finger. But did she want to experience that? A kiss from this handsome man beside her would be

the end of her resistance. All those years of keeping herself from desperately falling at his feet would be over in one quick moment of puddle-creating wonder. And she would be forever his whether he wanted to continue dating her or not. Was he in this for good? Her heart would be.

“How about we see if there’s even a moon out that night. And count me in for dancing.”

They at last cleaned up dinner, everyone lingering as long as possible, or at least that’s what it seemed like to Faith. Until finally, she and Decker were sitting on the back porch, gently swaying in their swing. She pulled a blanket up around her. “Everyone in the world should get to sit on a back porch like this once in their lives.”

“Yep. Everything seems to be okay when you’re sitting on the back porch.”

“And it slows down. I’m convinced time goes slower. Cows need to come down? Grass needs mowing? It’ll wait. And it does.” She leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Thanks for coming to dinner, Faithy. You fit in here. I hope you feel that.”

She nodded against him. “How could I not? You Dawsons are amazing at helping everyone feel loved. Dinner here is a gift. I just wish it lasted.”

He went still again. And then he brought her hand up to his mouth. His kisses, the softness of his lips, tore agonizingly through her. She wanted more than anything to turn to face him, to look into his eyes. Why didn’t she? Why couldn’t she? He tugged her closer, and so she did. His face was full, his eyes dark, intense. “Now I don’t know what exactly you mean by lasting. But I want this to last, too.” He

searched her face, and everywhere his gaze went, she felt. And she fought every inclination to lean into him.

"Say something." He smiled.

She dipped her head. "Oh, right. I'm thinking all kinds of things."

He laughed, quiet, gentle. "Any of them good?"

"Oh yeah. It's all good, Deck. I've wanted this my whole life it feels like."

He watched, waited.

But she didn't know what to say. She'd already admitted more than he had. And she was not going to be the one to change things officially between them. She had spent too much of her life waiting for him to be the one. Who knew if he would backpedal? Who knew what he really wanted. *Say something*. Her thoughts called out to him, but he waited for her to say something first.

Well. She had. She placed a hand at the side of his face. "I should probably head back."

His eyes clouded, and his face went blank. "Oh, right. Okay." He stood too quickly.

"No, wait. Deck..."

"No, it's okay, I get it. This is all a bit much anyway, right? We have enough to be worrying about besides us."

"Um, I'm not sure that's what I meant. You seem to be taking this differently."

"No, it's fine. We still on for dancing?"

"Of course. Let's make a day of it. I have Friday off."

He nodded. But the magic had dimmed, and he seemed distant. She didn't know how to bring any of it back.

All her lifelong frustrations with their relationship came rushing back, and suddenly she was more frustrated than she'd ever been. Why couldn't he just make the first move? Or say something. Tell her how he felt. Anything.

All these years she'd assumed he just didn't see her that way, and that was probably true. But now? Now when he seemed so into her, when he was flirting like crazy, when he was dating her? Now was the perfect time to say more.

He'd said he wanted them to last. The small reminder touched the outer reaches of her thoughts, but she brushed it away. It wasn't enough. Not when he could have done so much more.

"You okay?"

"I'm..." She was not okay. "Fine."

"Oh boy."

"What?"

"You are definitely not okay. And I'm not sure what I did here. But I learned a long time ago, and it was repeated memorably last Sunday dinner, that when a woman says she's fine, she is definitely not okay."

That made Faith laugh.

"Ah, at least you still have your humor. Talk to me, Faithy Haws."

And the brief respite from her frustration ended. *Talk.* "Deck, I don't know what to say."

"How about some of those thoughts you said you were thinking." He tugged at her hand, and they started walking out toward the barn.

"You first." There, she said it, half joking and totally serious.

His suspicious side-eye almost made her laugh. The man was really out of his element here. And she knew it, but he was gonna have to figure this out.

“I’m not sure you’re ready for some of my thoughts.”

That caught her attention. “Try me.”

He stepped closer, his eyes daring, his hand squeezing hers.

But then three huge dogs came bounding over to them, followed by Grace shouting, “Grab them. They’re so naughty!”

Faith lunged for the first one and grabbed his collar. The huge golden retriever licked her hand and then jumped up into her face. She laughed and backed away, letting go of the collar. “Oh no! Sorry!” She chased after him, but now he saw the game in it and bounded around, just out of reach.

Decker watched, laughing.

“Help! What are you doing?”

He shook his head. “I never help with this game. Gracie has the worst behaved dogs I’ve ever seen. There’s nothing you can do until she gets here with the treats.”

Faith looked back, and Grace was running toward them. As soon as she was close enough, she held up a bag. “Want a treat?”

The dogs bounded toward her, and Faith nodded. “Ah yes.”

Grace held out leashes. Deck and Faith clipped each dog onto a leash, and then she gave them each a treat. “Thanks. Whew.” She winked at Faith. “Not sure what I would have done there without your help.” She turned toward the barn.

“They’re starting an epic game of *Just Dance* if you want to join. Mav is talking like he’ll win.”

“What!” Faith shook her head and tugged Deck toward the house. “We can’t have that.”

Their talk could wait. And for some reason, Faith felt relieved to have the break.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Decker was about as frustrated as he'd ever been.

And his family was partly to blame.

As soon as he got back from dropping off a very distant and overly happy-sounding Faith, he sought out Grace. They were still playing *Just Dance*. He approached her. "Did you even need the dogs?"

She laughed. "Of course."

He narrowed his eyes.

"Well, and you needed me to need help with the dogs. It was getting way too intense out there, and Faith was obviously uncomfortable. You needed a comedic relief."

This surprised him. "You think she looked uncomfortable?"

"Yeah, she was giving off that vibe. You gotta give the woman time to adjust. You've been friend-zoning her over and over again from the sounds of things. This is gonna be a trust issue as much as anything."

Decker looked around at the others. Was his little niece right? Dylan was watching them. "Dyl?"

"You wondering what I think about how to approach Faith?" He laughed. "I'm obviously not the one to pretend to know anything at all about this. You should talk to Kate."

She called over her shoulder while dancing. "Talk to me about what?"

"Apparently I need to give Faith time?" Decker asked the back of Kate's head. Did that mean no kissing her? He was going to need to give the woman a wide physical berth from now on if that was the case.

"Time? Hasn't she had lots and lots of time when it comes to you?" Her voice sounded friendly, teasing even, but her words struck him with a particular itch right in his chest.

"But what does she need? For me to wait? To act? I've been moving forward. I thought tonight was going really well, but now..."

Mama came in just then. "Decker, honey, could you help me reach something in the pantry?"

With a certain amount of relief and trepidation, he followed her out of the room. Helping Mama in the pantry always included lots of talk, and sometimes it was the uncomfortable kind that pointed out how you could do better. But it was always loving in her own way.

He followed her into the kitchen, and she did indeed have a couple boxes of their food storage items to place back up on the top shelf. "Thanks, Decker. It's so helpful to have all you tall men around to do things like this." She patted his arm. "But I know you won't always be around here forever."

"Of course we will. Where are we gonna go?"

"I don't know about the others. Who knows where the Lord will take them. But you? Haven't you always been keeping one eye on New York?"

He followed her through the pantry to her small office in the back. She could use any room in the house, dad's old office, her bedroom, or they could build her another, but she preferred her space.

And after he breathed in her dried herbs and flowers and saw the quotes on the walls, the many books that lined her bookcases, he knew she would never trade it for another. This room would always be hers.

Decker smiled at the large and worn Bible in the center of her desk. He wondered how many times she'd read it.

"Sit down, Decker. Let's talk."

"I need it, don't I?"

"Well now, you say that like needing a talk with your Mom is tantamount to being in trouble or messing up or something."

"I'm just in a bind. I don't know what to do. Tonight I messed up somehow, and I don't know what I did."

"It's looking like you're really seeing Faith for the wonderful woman she is, is that right?"

"Yeah, I am. We haven't tried being anything but friends before, but everything I know about her just makes me want to be with her more. She's great, you know. She'd be a wonderful wife even." He was amazed at how easily the words flowed off his tongue. "I can't believe I just said that."

"Now, why not?"

"I haven't even dated her, not really."

"But you've spent your whole life with her. What will dating teach you that you don't already know?"

He thought about that for a long moment and then had a moment of clarity. "I guess I've been hoping it would show me how she feels about all this. I don't know what she wants, Mom."

"Have you asked her?"

"Yes, tonight. And that's when she really clamped up. Then Grace felt like she had to rescue her and interrupted us, and now Faith is acting weird."

"Does she know how you feel?"

"No. I mean, she knows I'm interested in giving this a shot."

"Do you really think you're gonna change your mind about her?"

He opened his mouth and then closed it. "No."

"Then why are you just giving this a shot? Why aren't you going after her like you mean it?"

He started to nod...then stopped. "Wouldn't that scare her away faster than anything?"

"I don't think so. And I think what this girl needs is some reassurance. Goodness, heaven knows she needs reassurance. What in her life is a sure thing at the moment?"

He had a sudden window of insight. "Nothing. Wow, nothing at all is sure for her." Her job at the dentist was probably just to help pay the bills. Her land was possibly being sold. If Willow Creek sold all around her, would she stay? Could she live off the money from the sale? Did she want to live there still? The woman was alone in the world.

He could kick himself for the years of him not being there for her. "I feel terrible that right now, this minute, she doesn't know that she has us. That she has me."

The meaningful look his mom sent him drove a burst of energy that shot him to his feet. "She should know right now."

"Yes, she should. But maybe you could tell her on your next date. Let her have some space tonight."

He nodded and sat back down, but he couldn't stay in his seat. "Mama, how are you so wise? And why couldn't I see it before?"

"Well, we all have trouble seeing things from other people's perspectives. Isn't the goal that we all see with our heart a little bit more and a little bit better?"

"Yeah, that would be great if we could do that." He was thinking he'd already epically failed. How would he improve? "But especially for her, I want to see how I can be there for her better."

"Well, we know the Bible says to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. But add to that all the examples of Jesus Himself helping people in the ways they most needed it. Isn't that really His way? He knows us, and He reaches out to us in just the ways we need. He helps us grow and helps us feel loved and teaches us all along the way." Mama smiled, and the room lit with hope. "I know you can do this, son. You have a lot of potential to bring joy into that deserving woman's life."

A sense of comfort joined the hope, and he started making plans to be more and do more for Faith Haws. "So

you don't think it would be too much too soon if I just tell her how I feel and my goals for us?"

She laughed. "Oh, Decker. No. It would not be too much too soon. That girl has been in love with you since the fifth grade."

He was floored. "Ma. She has not."

"She really has. And I can't wait until she tells you all about it." She grinned again. "But at any rate, she needs you. And I love that little lady so much it's time you showed her all the people in her life who would do just about anything for her." She lifted up a family picture. "She fits right here." She ran a finger in the space next to Decker. She was holding the last family picture they had taken when his dad was still alive. "He loves her, too. Do you know what he said one time when she was helping muck out the barn?"

"What?"

"He said, when Decker's ready, I want you to make sure he knows what a special lady that is. With Faith at his side, there is nothing our son couldn't do, nothing in this whole world."

Decker teared up immediately. "He said that?"

She nodded. "He did. And of course I wasn't gonna tell you unless you actually fell in love with her, but I think it's time you know."

"Fell in love." The dazzlement of those words struck him. Was he in love?

"Tosh. I shouldn't have even said that. People don't fall in love. They grow in love, and they stay in love with work. Love is a verb. But that's a conversation for another day."

Decker stood. And then he leaned down to kiss his mother on the top of her head. "You are a giant of a woman. Thank you, Mama."

"You're welcome. Oh, and son, I hope you get to spend some time out in those big buildings you like so much, but you're gonna have a devil of a time convincing Faith that anything in the world is better than what we have right here."

"I know, Mama. I know." He had had that exact same thought. But the opportunities stayed in his mind, and the draw to give it a shot never left. He couldn't help but think that maybe God was in those opportunities too. *His hand is stretched out still.*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Faith woke up with tears on her cheeks. Her pillow was wet. And her memory was hazy, but she had a strong sense that she'd just spent time with her grandpa. She sucked in a breath. And that he was trying to say goodbye.

She shook her head. "No, Grandpa."

But then parts of the dream came back, his ready smile, his laugh, his loyal presence at all the high school things that mattered. She closed her eyes and saw him standing, shouting her name when she received her high school diploma, and then the same again when she received her college diploma. He held her while she cried about her parents. He held her while she laughed. They figured out how to cook food together. And he suffered through many of her burnt attempts. A flash of good, happy thoughts filled her mind and wiped away the pain of her earlier realization. Was it time to say goodbye to Grandpa? She was going to the hospital to see him. She had to.

She got ready slowly, thinking, wondering. What happened to a person when they died? She knew they did not stop existing. She hoped they went home to God. She

hoped they were happy and at peace. She knew that he would be better off than lying in a hospital bed unable to speak or move.

But was it her place to decide?

"Help me know what to do." Her whispered prayer felt loud to her ears. "Please."

As soon as she was ready, she grabbed half of a bagel and her keys and opened the front door.

Decker stood there with a huge teddy bear.

She jumped. And then laughed. "What are you doing?"

He held it up. "Remember Grumby?"

"How could I forget Grumby? Where did you find him?"

"Well, turns out, he was in my attic."

She held open the door. "I can't believe this." He had won Grumby at a state fair carnival game, and Deck carried him around for her the whole night. But when she'd brought Grumby home, her dogs had freaked out and started to tear him to pieces. So Decker had picked him back up and told her he would take good care of the bear. They hadn't really talked about it much since. "I really can't believe you still have that bear."

"I couldn't throw it away. The others made fun of me, but he's been carefully wrapped in the attic all this time."

She nodded. "Wow."

"You okay?" He stepped closer, looking into her face.

"Not really." She sighed. "Deck, I gotta go see Grandpa." Her mouth quivered. "What if it's time to say goodbye?"

He nodded. This time he didn't argue. He didn't try to stop the hard thing. He just listened. "I'm sorry. Are you going to see him right now?"

"Yeah."

"Want company?"

"Yeah."

He held open the door and they both climbed into his truck.

"Thanks, Deck."

"Hey, any time. I want you to know you're not alone. Anything, all of the things, whatever you need, I'm here. All the Dawsons are here."

"Thank you."

"I'm just so sorry there was ever a minute or a second of your life that you didn't know that. You're important to me, Faith, now more than ever." He cradled her hand in his while they drove. "I'm here."

Tears filled her eyes, and she let them fall. She had a feeling it was going to be that kind of day. She squeezed his hand and then just concentrated on her breathing. Had Grandpa been trying to tell her something in her dreams?

"I think I dreamed about the time Grandpa dropped me off that first year in the dorms."

"Man, he missed you. I even saw him out riding your horse after you were gone."

Faith smiled. "Such a sweet man. I've been blessed beyond measure in so many ways."

"I wish everyone could be like you. Your faith, your love, your hope."

She just shook her head, unsure how to respond.

"Tell me more about your dream."

"Well, he walked me up to the front door of the dorms, and then they told him he couldn't come down the hallway

because it was a girls' dorm. And so he just said, 'I'll close my eyes when it matters,' and walked right on through." She laughed. "He was awesome."

"And no one's about to tell your grandpa no."

"No, they wouldn't." She smiled. "Then he helped load my stuff in the room, and when he turned to me in the dream, it changed. I was no longer remembering. It was new. Or something." She tried so hard to remember. "I wish I could relive it again. But he looked at me with so much love, so much."

A small sob shook her throat, but she kept talking. "He said, 'Goodbye Faithy. It's okay to let an old man go, so you can grow.' " She leaned her head back. "But that's different from what he really said that day. He talked about the growing thing, but he didn't say it like that, and..." She breathed in and out, trying to loosen the tightness in her chest. "And I just wonder if he's trying to tell me something."

Decker was quiet for a long time, and Faith didn't have anything else to say. So they arrived at the hospital and parked before the silence between them was broken. "I think that dream is real special. I don't know for sure what it means about your grandpa. But I don't think you need to be afraid of this. You can decide whatever you want here. And God will be with you. Don't be afraid. You aren't God. He doesn't expect you to be."

She nodded. "I'm not God." That felt like an odd thing to say, but for some reason it was comforting. They made their way up to the third floor, where Grandpa's room was. The nurses were cheerful and smiled. One of them winked and

held up her hand, pointing out that Faith and Decker were holding hands. Faith smiled and nodded. But what were they, really? Decker had been holding her hand for years. She couldn't think about that right now.

They entered the room, and out of habit she immediately listened for the sounds of his vitals. "No! Are they off?" She didn't hear anything, so she rushed to the monitors, but everything looked fine.

"The sound is turned down." Decker moved closer. "Here, let's turn it up." He adjusted the sound, and she heard evidence of his heart again.

Then she stood next to him, staring into his peaceful face. "I love coming here."

"I do too. That day I saw you? I had already been here once."

"What?"

"Yes ma'am, but I knew I needed to come back. We now know why that was." He smiled. "But I often come to think. It's a good quiet place for that."

She reached for Grandpa's hand. And felt distant. That wasn't usual. Somehow she knew he wouldn't be squeezing her hand today. "Are you ready to go, Grandpa?"

She didn't see anything or hear anything or even feel anything. "I wish he could tell me."

"You know. He can't even die if he wants to right now."

"What?" She turned to him, processing something she'd never thought before.

"His heart can't stop even if he dies. The machine is keeping it going."

She considered him. "I'm not God."

“Right. Now, I don’t know what’s right or wrong here, or even what you or anyone else should do in this situation, but I wonder if that’s significant. I wonder if Grandpa was trying to tell you something in your dreams.”

“Maybe.” She was stunned by this new train of thought. Could she be keeping Grandpa here? Was she stealing God’s role in allowing him to die? “I’m not God.” She fell into a chair. “Now I’m not saying I’m gonna do this.” She might be scaring herself with her own words. “But what if we turned everything off. Then he could keep living if he had more to do on earth, right?”

“I would think so.”

“And if not, he would then be free to...go.” She covered her mouth with her hand, trying not to let her face crinkle up in sorrow. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that.” She gripped the arms of her chair. “But maybe he is.”

Decker came and stood behind her. The hand he placed on her shoulder gave her strength. She felt his presence, felt his support, and felt his trust. And that was a big deal. She suddenly knew that he would stand by her whatever choice she made.

And with that knowledge, she felt free. “I think I can let him go.” She gasped. But she didn’t feel terror. Just sadness, but a peaceful kind of sadness. “Or rather, I can let God decide.”

He didn’t say anything but stood right where he was while she toyed with that thought. “I will have to think about it.” Then she stood. She kissed Grandpa on the head, a long, tender kiss, and then wrapped her arms around him best she could. “I love you, Grandpa. I love you so much.”

When she turned back to Decker, his own tears wet his face, and she fell into his arms.

"I've got you. I'm with you. I'll always be here."

She nodded against him and just let herself sink into his strong chest for a minute. "I will miss him, but I already do. Maybe this will set him free."

He rested his chin on her head. Faith was grateful he didn't seem to have much to say. Sometimes it was nice not to have to talk.

They left the hospital subdued. In many ways, they looked exactly like they had when they went in, but they were much different. Something had changed between them, at least in Decker's heart and mind. He hoped Faith felt it, felt his constancy, felt his...love. Could he say that after just newly realizing his attraction? Of course he could. He loved Faith. He'd always loved Faith.

They made their way to the truck. And when he held open the door, she paused and then turned to him. "Decker, thank you for being here. I know God put you in my life, put you *back* in my life, and I'm so grateful." She stood up on her tiptoes and placed a quick kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

He closed the door on her and resisted the urge to put a hand on his cheek where the sensation of her lips still tingled through him.

On the drive back to her house, he considered all the things he could say, that he wanted to say, and nothing

came to mind except words of support. He would just support her and be there for her.

By the time they pulled up in front of her house, he was ready to say what he should have said a long time ago.

They walked up to the front porch. Her large, wide, wraparound porch was well cared for, newly painted, and charming. She had done so much on her own. She was absolutely capable and really might not need him. He faltered a moment in his determination, but then his mom's voice came to mind. Consider who she has right now. What can she rely on?

He nodded to himself. He was Faith's. He had to show her. Plenty of girls had been into him, and plenty of women had shown interest as he got older, but he had dated very few of them. Maybe he'd just always known that Faith was going to be the one.

Faith turned around. "Hey, thanks for everything today. It's like you came right when I needed you." She laughed. "And I almost forgot. I've got Grumby back. That's true love right there." Then her eyes widened, and she turned the brightest red. "I didn't mean..." She sighed. "Wow, well, I think I'm going to go to bed early tonight. We still going dancing tomorrow?" She turned from him like she was going to go inside.

He reached for her hand. "I wouldn't miss it." He tugged at her gently until she was in his arms again. "I'm so happy I could be there today. That was real special, something I won't forget in a long time. You're one good woman. And when I say that, I mean *good*, like Bible-reading, good-choice-making, kind-to-others good."

She grinned up into his face, a small impish smile he hadn't seen in a real long time tugging at her lips. "Was kinda hoping you were thinking some other things when you were looking at me." She ran her hands up to his shoulders, laughing with her eyes.

"Oh you were? Hm. What could those be?" He wrapped his arms more fully around her, pulling her as close as he could. "I have lots of different things I think about you, but I'm saving some of them up for different occasions."

"That I like to hear." She stared up into his face with such a look of love, that he didn't know what to do with her. He, of course, wanted to love her right back. But today was challenging, today was a day to support and care... but she was really staring into his eyes.

He could get lost in those eyes, so lost he could forget what he was even about. There was goodness and, right now, a twinkle that made him want to stare forever. Her lips were parted too. And full. And soft. Did she want him to kiss her? He moved closer without even noticing. He was a breath away, and she bit her bottom lip. The soft indent was fascinating to him. He tilted his head and leaned closer.

And then an alarm went off in her house.

She jumped and yelped, holding her heart. "What on earth!" She turned and raced inside.

His brain was muggy and confused for a moment, but then he followed her in. The loud, piercing, screeching, noise said more than one smoke detector was going off, and it brought real pain to his ears.

"I'll go get a ladder."

"No, chairs will work."

Her house did not have raised ceilings like his. He grabbed a kitchen chair and followed her around, taking out every detector in the place, the noise gradually growing more quiet as they eliminated one noise maker at a time until finally they were all out. "Wow, I think every single one of those was blaring." He wiggled his ear.

"I know. I can't believe it. I thought for sure I recently changed these batteries. But I guess not."

"What? I can't hear you." He laughed.

Then she mouthed a bunch of stuff and swatted him.

"Well, we got that taken care of. Do you have any nine-volt batteries?"

She shook her head. "We don't have to do this now. I'm sure you have someplace to be."

"Oh, yes we do. If we can't find batteries here, I'll be buying you some new ones and coming right back."

"Deck."

"Faith. Do you really think my mama would let me back in the house if I didn't fix this?"

She sighed. "True. I can't have you homeless." She laughed. "Come on. They're in the garage."

They found a drawer full of batteries that looked to be relatively new. "Perfect. Let's get these all back up and monitoring for smoke."

"You're on."

They went back through the previous route, and one detector at a time was replaced in the ceiling.

When they were finally finished, he stood at the door again. This time, he just held out his knuckles. "See you tomorrow, hot shot?"

“See you tomorrow.” She watched him until he drove away.

And he told himself he would give a whole lot not to have to leave her alone in that house any longer.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Decker had to finish about ten more minutes of work for the Dawson Corporation, and then he was going to pick up Faith for a night of dancing. He *loved* dancing with Faith. It had been years since any of the gang had hung out at the local dance hall.

But the accounting books were depressing, and he couldn't be finished soon enough.

He looked up and saw Maverick standing in his office doorway. "Brother."

"Doing the books?"

"If you're here to see how things are going, only stick around if you want to be in a bad mood."

"That bad?"

"Let's just say I am beginning to see why you want to sell so badly."

His oldest brother came in and sat opposite his desk. "Is there anything else we can do? I don't really want to sell at all. I just haven't thought of any other option."

"I don't know, besides filing a loss with the government and receiving some stimulus programs for ranchers and

landowners..." He knew that wouldn't sit well with his brother.

"No way. We aren't going to be encouraging government handouts to people like us who have enough."

Decker nodded. "Then I really don't know how we can do anything but sell." He sighed. "And I don't know how I'm gonna feel watching Dad's land be bulldozed. What's it gonna be like to look out over the Haws property and see houses?"

Mav rubbed a hand over his face. "I don't like it any more than you. But we've tried sponsorships, rodeo wins. Those lasted for a good while, keeping us afloat, getting our cattle brand out there. But Nash is the only one going pro right now, and he's good, but..."

Nash showed up in the doorway. "But not good enough?"

"You're good enough. But there's only one of you."

Decker shook his head. "Nash, man, you're winning all the time. You're doing awesome. But this is much deeper than that. We have piles of expenses just to keep this place going."

"Well, I'm heading out again this afternoon."

They both perked up at that news. "Where to?"

"Just found out about another opportunity in Kentucky." He shrugged. "Last time there was some good money out there. And I'll be showing Dawson Ranch colors. Maybe bring in some more customers."

"Good work, brother. By the time you get back, we might have signed papers to sell. What's your vote?"

"I'm still thinking we should sell. It's the only way Willow Creek will stay afloat or relevant in our lives. What kind of

place we hoping to raise our children in? There won't be a main street if no one wants to stay here. What's the point of beautiful land if you're the only one living here?" He shrugged. "But I know you will make the best choice for us all. Thanks, brothers. Now I'm off to be the youngest irresponsible cuss and compete in some rodeo while you do the hard stuff." He dipped his head.

"Win big," Decker called as his brother headed back down the hallway.

"You know it."

Decker turned back to Mav. "Something's not sitting right."

"Which part?" Mav nodded at him to continue.

"Randall. What's he getting out of this?"

His older brother shrugged. "I don't know? Commission probably."

"But that's really not a lot. Not worth all the effort he's putting in here. I wonder if he gets a percentage or something." He frowned. "Do you have copies of the contracts?"

"Yep. I emailed everyone."

"Oh, right. Sorry, dude. Do you ever feel like everything is solely on your head and we just walk around complaining?"

"All the time. It's okay, brother. Pull it up. Let's take a look."

As soon as Decker's email was open, his inbox dinged. *Botts and Lindel*. The subject line read, "Offer enclosed."

His heart pounded with equal parts happiness and nerves. Why were they sending him an offer?

Mav came around and saw it right away. "What's this?"

"I don't know. It's not something I applied for or asked for...well, not since that time a few years ago when I was gonna move out there, remember? They've been in contact ever since."

"You gonna take this?"

"I don't even know what it is yet." He would rather have looked at it on his own, but he clicked it open. He scrolled through the message, opening the attachment next. "Looks like an amazing offer." They were going to pay him as though he'd already been there a couple years. "Wow, a full moving package." He scrolled some more. "This is a great offer." He sat taller. "They really want me."

"Of course they want you, brother." Maverick's hand on his shoulder felt almost like his dad's. What would he have said? It felt good to be successful and wanted by one of the largest accounting firms in New York, in the world. But did he want to go?

"You gonna take it?"

Decker sat back in his chair, looking up at his brother. "Dude. I don't even know. I've been sticking around here because of our books. I didn't like the idea of leaving all this mess with you. But this is about to be solved. The sale should put us in a good way for a long time. If we invest well, forever."

"So you're thinking we don't need you anymore? You're free to go?"

Decker couldn't tell what Mav thought about this. His voice was deceptively blank. "Uh, what do you think I should do?"

Mav ran a hand through his hair and then sat back down with a heavy grunt. "I don't have any real advice. You know what Bailey and I went through. We are strong proponents of following your dreams. Sometimes you have to learn the hard way what you really want."

Decker considered his brother. Bailey had left him to go pursue her music, and he had left to chase after his world championship title. And they'd both come back here. "Maybe not everyone's life plan includes living in Willow Creek. I love it here. I love our land. I love Ma and you guys, but what if I'm supposed to spend some time in New York?"

"Supposed to?"

"Yeah. What if God's hand is in this?"

Mav nodded. "Well, if that's what you want to know, then you're asking the wrong guy." He laughed and pointed up to the sky.

"Good point." He smiled at his brother.

"But something else to consider is Faith." Maverick stood. "Bailey and I both learned the hard way that no dream is worth it if the person you love isn't involved." He turned. "Oh, and take a look at those contracts, would you? I need another set of eyes on them."

Deck nodded and then turned back to his offer. This was the chance of a lifetime. Anybody in his field would jump at this, would have already accepted the offer.

Mav was right. He was going to need to take this to God. He wondered if this was a chance for him to make up for lost time. He'd given up a lot to stick around in Willow Creek, and it was all coming back fourfold.

But Faith. He stared out the window toward her property. He often did that when thinking about her. He needed to ask her what she thought. But that was crazy talk. They weren't even officially a thing yet. He hadn't even kissed the woman, for heaven's sake. But he wanted to. Laughing to himself, he pulled up the contracts. Did wanting to kiss her count?

Well, he would bring it up first chance he got, the first moment it didn't feel like a creepy guy moving too fast.

He read through the contracts only half paying attention. Everything looked standard to him. Then he stopped on a couple words. *Mineral rights*. His breath caught. Now that was something to explore.

Soon he was diving deeper into the law and property sales and the town records of Willow Creek. He hardly noticed the time passing until his phone beeped. "Are we going matching?" Faith sent laughing emojis and an old photo of them in high school going to a school dance with matching outfits.

It was getting dark outside. He jumped up. And then sent a laughing emoji. "Whatever you want."

Nah. But I'm looking forward to this. I haven't seen the Deck swing dance in a long time.

He groaned. The Decker Swing. Oh boy. He'd been such a goofball, and honestly, he'd loved the attention. *Only if I get to see the Faith Wiggle*. He grinned. She looked good. And it was fun. Tonight might be the much-needed break from everything that was weighing them down.

And even if she didn't know it yet, he needed a little celebration. He'd just received a dream offer from the

company he'd always wanted to work for. And he had learned some very interesting things about Willow Creek that just might change everything. He couldn't tell Faith, or anyone, yet—not until he was sure about what he thought he knew. But it might be good news to a lot of people.

But tonight? Tonight was all about the fun.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Faith ran out the door as soon as she saw Decker's truck pull up and then swung up into the front seat before he could even get out.

"What are you doing, Faithy girl? That's my door to get." He grinned.

"I don't have time for that. Let's go!" She smiled and then cranked up his music. And suddenly things were back to normal between them. At least as normal as a person was in high school and college. They sang at the top of their voices to every country song that came on. And by the time they arrived at the bar, he was well and truly ready to just get out there and dance.

The place looked like it always had. Solid wood lined the walls. It was mostly dance floor, with tables surrounding it and filling the room off to the side. A bar on the far end was packed already. "We getting some food?"

"Oh yeah, I haven't had their queso in forever."

"Okay. Let's grab a table."

They hurried to the last remaining one. It was that kind of place. And then put their jackets down to claim it.

Deck waved to Caleb. "Hey, man. Can you get us drinks and queso? We're heading out to the floor."

"Sure thing, Deck." Caleb high-fived them and took their drink order.

The music started up again, and they joined the line dance that was forming. Growing up in Willow Creek meant you knew every country line dance ever known to man. Their PE teacher had made sure of it. No one understood how learning line dances qualified for PE, but Mrs. Pence was bound and determined that they had a unit of dancing every year.

And so he and Faith stood side by side, showing off just a little bit. She would add some extra moves now and then, and he'd do them right back. Then they would turn with the whole group and repeat the sequence. Soon others were filling in the extra stuff too. And Deck laughed. "We're creating a new dance."

"The Willow Creek special," she shouted back over the music.

It was so good to see Faith happy and carefree. The next song was more of a country swing dance, and he pulled her close. "You ready to fly?"

"You know it." She grinned.

And so he wrapped her around and around his waist and then down through his legs, sliding on the floor before bringing her up high into the air. She landed back in his arms, out of breath. "Wow."

He stared back into her eyes, close to his, "Wow."

He held her longer than he needed to, but he didn't want to let go. Then they moved through the normal swing

moves, spinning, sidestepping, and then he didn't want any of that anymore. He just kept her in his arms and slowed down their rhythm.

"So, what's this?"

"I just want you right here for a minute."

Her eyes widened, and she smiled up into his face.

"Sounds perfect."

He held her close, and the music switched to something slow, and he kept her right there.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Faith didn't think anything could be better than dancing in Decker's arms while he looked at her just how he was looking right now. She suddenly felt more beautiful, more important, more cherished than she'd ever felt.

"What are you thinking?" His eyes drank her in, and his voice sent tingly rumbles through her.

Did she dare tell him she was wishing he'd just keep on looking at her like that for the rest of her life?

He turned them around while they danced, and held her closer. "I'll tell you what I'm thinking first. I'm trying to get better at that."

He was? That was great news. She half held her breath. His eyes flashed with a tiny bit of insecurity, and then a sparkle of confidence took over. She loved how well she could read him.

"I'm thinking right now that I would love to just hold you right like this while you look up into my eyes the way you're doing now, forever." He grinned.

And she gasped.

"So, I hope you don't get tired of dancing." He winked.

She laughed. "How could you know that's exactly what I was thinking?"

"I didn't, but I hoped it was." He spread his fingers out over her back. "I really love you right here."

"Me too." She swallowed. Was this all her dreams coming true? Right in this moment?

"What I need to say, I guess I'll just say right here. Faith, I'm all in. I'm here for you. Forever. I'm your friend, but I want to be so much more. You have quickly become the most important person in my life. And I just want you to know that. You might feel different. You might not be ready for this. And my feelings don't in any way dictate your—"

She stepped up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his. This was it. This was her moment, and he didn't have a single thing to worry about. She smiled at his reaction as he fumbled for a moment, and then his hands closed around her back and she was so close she didn't think there was any difference between where he stopped and she began.

His mouth slowed, and he caressed her lips in a beautifully long, intense moment of love and desire all mashed into one.

She didn't think she could stand on her own two feet any longer.

And he didn't stop.

She clung to him, she responded. Everywhere his lips went, she answered. And then he deepened the kiss, and she wanted to melt right there. What was this fiery storm raging inside? She always imagined a kiss from Deck to be sweet, caring, gentlemanly like he was. But this. She could hardly think.

And then people around them came back into focus. They were making noise. Clapping?

“Oh, Deck!” she murmured.

They paused. And with her eyes still closed, she rested her head against his. “Is everyone looking?”

“I don’t know yet.”

She opened her eyes to see his staring into her.

Soon they were surrounded by everyone they knew and loved, by people who’d watched them grow up together. They were chanting their names in a loud confusion that just made Faith laugh.

She put hands to her cheeks and then cheered with them all.

Decker pulled her up on his shoulders, and they moved out into the center of the floor again. The music picked up, and everyone danced together in one bouncing, packed group. She waved her arms around above them all. What a great town. She yelled up into the air, “I love you, Willow Creek!”

Everyone cheered louder.

After another hour out there on the dance floor, she and Decker slid into their booth. She was wet with perspiration and immediately began fanning herself.

Caleb showed up with their queso. “The first batch got cold.”

“You’re awesome, dude.”

“Thanks. Happy to see you two together.”

Faith smiled.

And then they looked at each other and laughed. “I had no idea everyone would be so happy.”

"Me neither. I didn't know they even noticed." She shrugged. And then drank her water, all of it.

"Those were some moves out there, Faithy Haws."

"I could say the same about you." She sighed. "This is fun."

"I haven't had fun in a long time."

"Me neither. Thank you." She toyed with their chips. "When did you decide you wanted to kiss me?" It felt like a built-up, pent-up, decade-long desire, much like what she felt.

"I don't know. I think it's been building. I realized it had been building just this past month. When I invited you for dinner, I sort of forgot how to speak."

She laughed. The wonder of it all suddenly coming back to amaze her. "Are we sure this is real?"

"I'm going to ask myself that same question tonight."

"Whenever you wonder, just send me a text."

"That was some kiss." He whistled.

"Deck."

"What?"

"Are we really going to talk about it?"

"Why not? I've never been kissed like that. I've never felt anything like that. You are something."

"Oh stop."

He laughed. "Tell me it wasn't the most amazing kiss of your life."

And here, she debated. What did she want to admit to him? But looking into his large and hopeful eyes, she knew she wanted to tell him all, give him all. "That was the only kiss of my life."

His mouth dropped. And then his grin grew with some huge goofy satisfaction. And she remembered she was dealing with Decker, twelve-year-old, fourteen-year-old, eighteen-year-old, Decker; and all of those versions were coming into play.

“You feeling overly pleased by that?”

“Well sure. And impressed. You certainly know how to bring a man to his knees.”

She sure hoped so. But she didn’t say that. “Well, I think it helps that I’ve been waiting for that moment since the day I knew what a kiss was.”

“And that, Faithy Haws, is something I don’t take lightly, at all.” The respect that shone out of his eyes filled her with a light, a happiness, that she’d wait for him.

“I guess I was already best friends with the very best man I would ever meet.”

“Do you ever wonder how we got so lucky?” He reached for her hand and caressed the back with his thumb. “This is an incredible dream right now. I look at you. I see you right there. I will never, ever forget that kiss, but did it really happen?”

“Ah, there you go, wondering if it was a dream.”

“Too true.”

They ate their chips, laughing about old memories, and when it finally grew too late to hang around any longer, they went for a drive in his truck. “The stars are cool tonight.” He peered up through his windshield. “Let’s go take a look.”

She nodded. Snuggling into his side while he drove them around Willow Creek might be her most favorite activity of

them all. "I'm just happy right here."

"And that's where I want you to stay. We're going to have a very simple life, either dancing or driving in my truck."

The silence that followed that statement was thick, and Faith wasn't sure whether to take his comment at face value, or to read into it a life of happiness with Deck.

But he kissed the top of her head. "I meant that, Faith. I see your mind spinning. I want this to progress to forever. I think I've found my other half, and I'm ready to tell you that right now. But I'm a patient man. I'll wait forever if I need to."

She pulled his arm around her tighter. "I've been waiting for those words for a long time."

Nothing else was said, but a calm assurance filled the truck. Faith wanted to live in that warm and cozy bubble of peace forever. *His Hand is stretched out still.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

As soon as Faith picked up the phone and said hello in his ear, Decker smiled. "Hey, beautiful."

"It's so good to hear your voice."

"Mm. You too. But, hey, Mom has a favor to ask us."

"Sure, what's up?"

"You might want to hear it first."

"Okay, do you want to do it?"

"Uh." Suddenly he really didn't want to say what his mom had asked him to do. He wrinkled up his face.

"Deck, out with it."

"Couples therapy."

The silence on the other end made him laugh. "Which I realize now sounds even weirder than I thought it was gonna be, but hear me out. Mama said that Pastor John is running a new class for couples who just need to work on some things, or talk things through, and they are low on numbers. She said the pastor was asking around for couples, any couples, to help round out the group."

"Okaaay." She sounded like she was moving around.

"What are you doing over there?"

"Oh, just cleaning out the barn."

He shook his head. "I'll be right over."

"You don't have to do that. But I wouldn't mind seeing you."

"Say no more. I'll come over the fence."

"Great. We can ride after."

"After. It's gonna take all week to clean out that barn."

He laughed. "In fact, I'm calling in the brothers."

"Come take a look first."

"You want some time alone in the barn with your new boyfriend?" He held his breath.

"Are you asking me to be your girlfriend, Decker Dawson?"

"Maybe. Should I wait until I get there to ask you properly?"

"See you soon, cowboy."

He passed by his mom in the kitchen. "Faith and I are in. And we're gonna need some help cleaning out her barn."

"Right now?"

"Give us an hour." He winked and she swatted at him with her kitchen towel.

"You be a gentleman, son."

"Always."

He snatched up one of her cookies and headed out the door, texting Dylan on his way. "Can we get some help cleaning out Faith's barn in an hour or so?"

"Yep."

And Decker knew it would be done.

As his horse leapt over the fence between their properties, he whooped out into the air around him. Today

was gonna be a good day.

He tied up his horse to the post outside the barn and peered inside.

Faith had a bandana around her hair, and she was lugging what looked like junk out of the back tack room.

"Well, this is better than I thought."

She dropped an old tire rim, and a smile lit her face. "Deck." She ran to him and pulled him into a hug. "Good to see you."

He cradled her close, and then when she looked up into his face, he hungrily covered her lips with his own. Everything lit inside, and the sweetness he found was more than he thought possible.

She smiled while he was still trying to kiss her, so he stopped. "Mm, you taste like strawberries."

She laughed. "Thanks for coming, Deck. I honestly don't even know if some of this stuff is worth keeping. If it were up to me, I'd throw it all away."

"Well, let's see here." He lifted up an old rusty wrench. "This is a relic. Definitely belongs in a museum."

"Yeah, the museum called Benson's Dump."

"Fair enough. You know, we haven't been by Benson's lately. We don't even know what's going on in this town."

"We can certainly fix that today. Want to back my truck down here? Let's just load up the bed."

"Yes, ma'am."

They worked hard for about forty-five minutes before Dylan showed up with Mav and a bunch of their friends. "All right. Man, good to see you guys."

"No problem. Let's get this stuff loaded. Mav backed his truck down here too." Dyl pointed to the open barn door.

Faith high-fived them all. "So, ask me or Deck here if it's a keeper or trash. And then we're all going to pay a visit to Benson."

It only took another forty-five minutes, and the place was cleaned out. They had a pile of donations, and she even gave some of her stuff to the guys. All in all, Decker was pleased with the results. He grabbed a broom. "Let's get this place swept out, and then we can have dinner in here."

"I'll put Patch in here. Is that okay, Deck?"

"Oh right. Yep. Put him next to Electric. That should keep him happy."

She laughed. "Or at least not bored. She's bossy."

They worked to finish the last few details, then piled in the two trucks and made their deliveries. Maverick pulled up to the dump first, and Decker's phone rang. He turned it on speaker. "What's up?"

"Hey, just wanted to let you two know that Benson told me the biggest news in town is that Decker Dawson and Faith Haws are finally dating."

"Oh yeah, we made the big time!" Decker laughed.

"They're predicting a July wedding. He asked if I wanted in on the bets."

The guys in their back seat laughed and catcalled and made all the fun noises, but he and Faith were quiet. She wasn't looking at him.

"Hey, don't worry about them."

She shrugged. "I'm not. Hey, it's funny, right?"

He didn't think it was that funny. He had actually secretly wondered if it would be possible to marry her this summer. And he hadn't dared say a word about it to anyone. But now, he wasn't sure. She seemed uncomfortable. Ugh. He couldn't possibly bring it up yet. Then he really would look like a crazy guy. But he wished she'd at least have laughed or something about the July date.

When they pulled up to Benson, his eyes widened in surprise. "We were just talking about you two."

"Yeah, we heard." Decker shook his hand. "We have a huge load for you today."

"I see that. You just go on ahead and follow Mav back to where I told him to dump the stuff." But then he paused. "So, are things moving pretty quickly with you two? Any news in the close future?" His eyes searched their faces.

"You trying to see if you're gonna win some bet, Benson?" Faith leaned across Decker to smile at the man.

He backed away shaking his head. "Of course not, just happy that two old friends are moving in the right direction." He tapped the top of their truck. "You get yourselves settled back there and come have a soda with me in the back room."

Decker drove forward, creeping along at a safe pace behind Maverick. "What would Willow Creek be without good ol' Benson?"

"I don't even know."

Decker drove everyone back to Faith's house. He kissed the top of her head. "Hey, I'll go clean up and come back to pick you up. I forgot to tell you. Before couples therapy, first we get to play Bingo."

“You two going to Bingo at the church?” Mav called from Faith’s front porch.

“Yep. You guys going?”

“Bailey and I will be there. Dylan and Kate too.”

“Oh, this is gonna be good!” Faith laughed. She hopped out of the truck, already razzing his brothers about couples therapy after, and Decker drove off with a smile that hurt his cheeks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Faith and Decker sat at a table with the other married Dawson brothers. She had never seen so much tension around a Bingo game.

With every number or letter called, the guys made noises. They covered their cards. They shouted out reactions to the room. Half their congregation was there, and she was pretty sure every single one of them thought the Dawson clan had lost their marbles. They called the last letter-number combination ,and Mav, Dylan, and Decker all jumped to their feet cheering. But then Kate called out, “Bingo!”

And she won.

Seemed like a lot of noise for something like Bingo, but at the end of the hour, two of them came away with wins, so maybe making a big fuss helped your luck. She had no idea. It certainly made everything more fun.

Pastor John stood up at the front. “For those of you interested, we are holding a marriage class right after Bingo tonight. Just come on up to the front and circle up the

chairs. All are invited to join our regular class. We're hoping to grow our numbers."

The brothers shared a look that Faith could not decipher, but Bailey put her hand on Mav's arm. "Come on. Everyone could use a little couples therapy."

He grumbled a little bit, but they all followed, and pretty soon they were sitting in a marriage class with their pastor at the front. Half the class were Dawsons or spouses and friends of Dawsons.

And suddenly Faith got kind of nervous. What if this was one of those classes where everyone had to speak? She leaned over to Decker just as he leaned over to her.

"What if we have to know stuff in here?" His eyes showed his sudden panic.

"I know. I don't have anything to add to whatever they've got going on."

"We'll try to slide in under the radar maybe. Dylan and Kate can do all the talking. Or Mav and Bailey, they've been through a lot."

Faith nodded. Surely the pastor would call on the more expert Dawsons to contribute. The other people in the group looked like they were older, at least older than her and Deck.

But the first thing Pastor John did after everyone introduced themselves was call on Decker. "So, you two have the longest standing relationship of anyone in the room, arguably. Except of course for myself. You also have the newest relationship. What can you tell us about keeping the friendship alive in your relationship?"

Decker reached for Faith's hand and squeezed kind of hard. But his face was pleasant, blank of emotion. He cleared his throat. "So. Um. We feel much more like the very new instead of the expert long timers." He looked to Faith, and she nodded.

"But you are already speaking in terms of we, and you just looked to Faith to confirm. I think you have a lot to teach us." Pastor John nodded in encouragement.

So Decker and Faith exchanged looks. She really didn't know what to say at first, but then suddenly she remembered how Decker had just shown up, so many times, and how much it meant to her. "One thing Decker does that really helps is to just be there. We're obviously not married or anything yet, but he's shown up at my door, or at the hospital in some pretty key moments. And it has made a ton of difference."

Pastor John beamed like she'd just quoted all of Genesis. "This is excellent. It can apply to so many things. Being present in a marriage. How do the rest of you see this as working for you?"

Decker leaned over. "I didn't know it was so important."

"You're really good at it. Like today. I mentioned I was cleaning out the barn, and you show up with a whole team. It's great, Deck."

He nodded, suddenly feeling taller.

Then the pastor turned back to him. "Have you noticed something Faith has done that has really helped in your relationship?"

And then Decker froze. *Think. Think.* "She is amazing. And she is probably the whole reason we have a

relationship. I think I'm lucky she would even look in my direction after all this time." He stretched his neck out. *Think.*

And then their talks about the Bible, her grandpa, her dedication to the Lord filled his mind, and he breathed out in relief. "She is a lot like her name. Faith. She's the reason our conversation moves to important things. She's why we are noticing God's hand in our lives right now. She's trying to make tough decisions and involves me and the Lord in so many ways. I feel like we're better because of it."

Pastor John might have cheered. "Another fantastic talking point for the rest of us. We all know the commandment to be one. But being one with each other is only a partial goal. What we really want is to be one in Christ. We three together in one." He nodded, as pleased as she'd ever seen him. "Let's talk about ways we can be one in our marriages and how to invite Christ into that oneness."

As the talk moved around them, Faith was kind of dazed. Decker thought so highly of her? She had no idea.

Then something Bailey was saying really resonated with her. "I made some mistakes. Everyone will. Mine are just so much more visible than yours will be, I hope for your sake." She laughed, and everyone joined her. "But inviting Christ into the picture also invites forgiveness into your relationship. Grace and I are so blessed that Maverick was already used to governing his life that way. Him taking us back was the largest act of grace outside of the Lord's that I have ever experienced. And it made me strong."

“Bailey’s so worth it. When it comes down to it, who am I to withhold forgiveness when the Lord so freely gives it?”

“What are some other blessings that might happen if you’re both trying to be one with Christ?”

Faith thought about it. She thought about how nice it was to have Decker with her when she last visited Grandpa, how awesome it was to have his support and respect when it came to most things, from cleaning out her barn to just eating dinner with his family.

But there was one thing that was difficult. “Pastor John, what about when you disagree? How can you be one or be one in Christ when you don’t want the same things?”

She felt Decker’s gaze, but she didn’t turn to look at him. She had to sell her land. She knew she did. Would Decker always disagree with that? Would he hold it against her? Would she lose that strength if she moved forward with doing something he didn’t agree with?

She expected Pastor John to maybe talk about unity and working out differences or to brush off her question, but instead he pointed at her with the hugest smile of the night. “And this question is where we will be spending the rest of our time, because it is the most important thing for each of you to realize.”

“Well, okay then. Glad I asked. “ She laughed.

Decker leaned closer. “You worried about selling?”

She nodded. It was crazy how he seemed to read her mind.

Pastor John got out his dry-erase marker and turned to his whiteboard. “We’re going to talk about ‘I feel’ statements and effective listening skills. And we are going

to talk about the difference between disagreeing and contending. One is a normal, natural part of any relationship. The other causes discord and hurt feelings.”

This time the longer married couples shared their experiences. Faith listened closely to them because her parents had only ever argued behind closed doors. She’d heard them before, talking in their room, and sometimes she could tell that the conversation was not pleasant. But she never saw the result or how they worked through things. The faces they showed her outside their room were pleasant and kind and well-spoken. So she really had no idea what to do when someone disagreed.

One of the couples, the Hansens, looked a little run-down. The wife seemed tired, the husband not particularly affectionate. Mrs. Hansen looked kindly in her direction. “I used to think that if we argued, it meant we were getting a divorce. I remember the first time we didn’t agree, I went crying to my mother in shock and horror. And you know what my mom did?”

Everyone leaned closer.

“She laughed.”

Faith smiled.

“She told me what everyone realizes sooner or later: we all disagree. What we need to learn is that we should disagree kindly and with great respect.” She didn’t look at her husband, didn’t reach for his hand or anything. And he didn’t seem particularly warm toward her in that moment either.

The pastor talked for several more minutes about assignments the couples were to do, and then he closed

with a prayer for each of the couples. It was nice to be prayed over like that. He ended with, "Please bless these thy children and watch over them as we know their loved ones are praying too for their love and watch care."

Faith tried to fight the rising loneliness, but it came anyway. Who prayed for her?

"See you at the Willow Creek Fair this weekend." The meeting closed down around them. People stood to leave or to chat with one another.

She put on a brave face and gratefully clung to Decker's hand.

"You riding?" Decker lifted her hand to his lips.

"Yes, I am. And selling baked goods and helping run the cakewalk." She grinned. "I heard our fair has been advertised all over the place, even all the way up to Dallas."

"Now, that's something. Do you think we'll bring in some money?"

"Yes, and I hope we also get some notoriety. It would be good for everyone if more people came back to see us."

"True. We'll have our cattle brands out. We'll ride also, and I know they're bringing in some of the Lost Creek guys. That should help."

"Anything will help. If everyone sells, we still need to get some people in here to buy from the developers, or the whole city will collapse around us, and we will have lost our land. I think Willow Creek can become something even better if we sell. But I think we're gonna need to help with that."

"You may be right." Decker sighed.

She knew he didn't like the idea of selling. "It's going to be okay. You might even like it better."

He nodded but didn't say anything.

She laughed. "Is this one of those moments when we're having a disagreement?"

"I guess so." He shifted in his seat to fully face her. "Should we try an 'I feel' statement?"

"Totally." She waited.

"Oh, me?"

"Well, yeah. You feeling something you want to share?"

He studied her then opened his mouth, and then closed it as the others joined them. Maverick was there, and Dylan too. They were overly amused, and he knew exactly what was going on.

"Can we help you, brothers?" Decker tried intimidation.

Maverick laughed. "Yes, I would love to hear what you're about to say." He pulled up a chair.

Dylan did the same. "Yes, me too."

Faith covered her mouth with one hand and tried not to look like she was about to laugh.

"Oh brother. Do you all want to know how I feel? Fine. I feel like I'm betraying my father to sell his land. I feel this horrible ache in my heart to think that when I look out over the land, I won't see Faith. What I'll see is a bunch of housing developments. I feel like losing the land is losing my dad all over again and the woman I love." He stopped.

“The woman I have always loved but been too dumb to see it.”

Faith's eyes held tears, and the brothers were silent.

“Oh, and the part about all y'all. When anyone talks about selling, I know you're not trying to do this, but I feel like you are attacking those two things, my most precious memories and the most precious person in my life. So I struggle to maintain my composure.” He exhaled long and slow, trying to release some of the tension.

“And how do you feel now?” Pastor John too? He had been standing just outside Decker's view.

“Better.” Decker smiled. “Hearing myself talk made me realize that no one is attacking me by trying to sell their land.” He tapped his leg with Faith's hand in his own. “It made me feel better to get some of that off my chest.” He looked around. “And embarrassed that I said so much.” He pointed to them all. “Don't you ever get yourself in this sort of situation. It's like a truth serum.”

They all laughed. But Faith's eyes were still shining, and the adoring look she was sending his way just might have made being vulnerable in front of his brothers and the local pastor worth it.

Maybe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A town fair was an amazing thing. No one who loved town fairs could resist another, and that's why Faith knew this whole thing was going to be a wonderful success. She walked the fairgrounds just before sunrise, getting everything ready. She'd set up her bake sale booth, her cakewalk booth, and got Electric all settled in her stall. Then she went in search of Mama Dawson. They were in charge of organizing the 4-H events and helping the kids know where to go. Since they were going to be at the check-in desk, someone had also asked them to take tickets. She had people sitting in at each of her booths and working with her every step of the way.

So, Faith was feeling like a huge part of this fair. And loving every second of it.

Bailey was coming with a bunch of celebrities, including some bigger names, and those tickets were sold separately. All the food venues and trucks were an additional amount of points per ticket. It was somewhat of a complicated process to check everyone in, and she wanted to make sure she and Mama Dawson understood what to do.

She loved the fairgrounds right before a big event. It was still and felt like something was about to rise, like it was on the verge of a great energy.

She imagined the empty paths around the arenas filled with people. She could smell the food, hear the crowd's happy chatter and the distant announcer for the current events or shows. It was a beautiful thing.

They had people coming with animals to show. Judges passing out ribbons would be hidden among the typical family guests. She could so easily be caught up in the thrill of it.

A part of her was so grateful she would be barrel racing again. It just felt like her. And she loved feeling like herself again. With so much going on, she'd lost a bit of her energy, her spunk, her tease. But she knew it would come back. Decker was already helping on that front.

Mama Dawson was sitting at their spot, ready to meet the guests who wouldn't start to show up for another two hours yet. But the vendors, the competitors, the performers, they needed to be checked in as well, and they would all arrive early. She and Mrs. Dawson would be ready.

She sat next to her at their table.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're here. Faith, we're gonna be two busy people, I'm afraid."

"I agree. Maybe we can set up a couple more tables or something? Or a line to our right at least?"

"Yes, I think that would be a good idea."

"Let's tell the fair boss when he comes to check on us."

She sat by the woman who had always been a second mom to her. "How are you, Mrs. Dawson? I never really

hear how you feel about all this land selling.”

She nodded and turned thoughtful eyes up to the sky. “I just know we’re in His hands. Good will come of all of this. I’m sure of it.”

Faith considered her. “I believe that. The Lord can make good of all that happens to us. But how do you know when to let go and when to keep trying to make things happen?”

“That is a great question. I think I’m always working and trying, and I’m always letting go.”

“So you do both at the same time?”

“Yes, I surely do. I work like crazy in the best direction I know how, but all the while I trust that whatever comes of all that effort will work together for our good.”

“But it could all fall apart around you.”

“True. I didn’t say we wouldn’t have any disappointments. Sometimes those are for our good, you know.”

“Ah, that is the truest thing I’ve heard in a long time.”

“You’ve been through so much, haven’t you?”

Faith was quiet for a moment, considering her life, her losses, and she nodded. “I guess I have. But this whole time I’ve been feeling particularly blessed. Except when Grandpa went into the hospital. But then, soon after, God gave me Decker.” Faith smiled. “It’s hard to think anything except how the Lord is always blessing me.”

“That is a remarkable faith you have there, Faith.” She winked. “I’m so happy that you and my son are moving forward at last.”

“I am too. You know? I never thought it would happen. I sort of lost faith on that one.”

“Not me. I knew he’d recognize you as the best thing that has ever happened to him, sooner or later.”

Her heart expanded with such a beautiful warmth. “You are too good to me, Mrs. Dawson.” She squeezed her around the shoulders. “Do you know what he said? He said that he doesn’t want to sell because he feels like he’s letting down his dad. And because he feels like he’s losing a connection to me.” She couldn’t believe it still. Such a tenderhearted thought.

“He’s loved you for a long time. Love comes in all shapes and sizes.”

They talked of all kinds of things and relived memories from Faith’s growing up, but the best part of the conversation was when Mrs. Dawson talked of Faith’s parents. She’d known them growing up. All of them had been raised right there in Willow Creek, and Mrs. Dawson knew stuff about Faith’s parents and how they met that Faith herself had never heard before.

“And your grandpa. He’s the one everyone loved to go talk to.”

“I can well believe that.” Her grandpa knew how to listen and respond in just the right way.

“Kids would come to sit with him in the barn. Of course, he’d put them to work. And they’d talk and talk, and he’d listen and then basically convince them to talk to their parents.” She laughed. “Or at least that’s what he did for me.”

Faith never got to hear just what Mrs. Dawson had gone to talk to her grandfather about because the vendors

started showing up, and from that point on, the line never let up.

Hours later, their replacements showed up to get the midday stragglers, and she and Mrs. Dawson made their way to the arena.

"This rodeo will be all fun. We've got out-of-towners, our own boys, you, everyone coming together here in our own arena. There might be money up for grabs, but it's all in fun."

"I'm excited. I didn't realize how much I missed barrel racing until I did it last week."

"And you're a natural. You and Electric could beat anyone, I'm sure of it."

"And you could make me feel better about coming in last place. Are we in our regular seats?" The Dawsons, Haws, and Waltons all sat together at every rodeo. Of course Mrs. Walton was alone now, and Faith was all that was left of the Haws, but she valued this tradition. And besides, she loved to sit with Mrs. Dawson when she didn't have to be backstage.

Pretty soon the stands were filled, and Faith was surrounded by all the people she loved. Dawsons on all sides, and people she'd grown up with in her town. The stands were also filled with visitors. And she was happy to see them. These were the people they needed to bring back to Willow Creek.

Decker and Maverick were not sitting with them, but Nash had come back for the rodeo. Everyone was smiling and happy. Faith wondered what secrets Nash kept. He didn't reveal much about himself, not really. She wondered

if he had a girl somewhere. Or what he did with his downtime while competing in the rodeos.

Everything was about to begin. Maverick was getting hooked up to the travelling microphone, and she could see a parade lining up to get this thing started.

The first person in line was none other than Decker. "What is he doing?"

Mrs. Dawson squinted her eyes. "Is that our Decker?" She grinned. "I have no idea."

Then Maverick opened up with his usual. "Helloooo Willow Creek! It's Friday night in Texas. You're at the rodeo at the Willow Creek Fair. It doesn't get any better than this."

The crowd went crazy, people standing and cheering and making noise.

Maverick's grin could have cracked his face.

Eventually they quieted enough so that he could speak. "And now, we will introduce some of our acts. But first, to get us started, Decker has a special announcement."

Decker came flying out in full costume, his horse tearing around the arena at a gallop. He went around once and then circled back until he was standing in front of Faith.

He held out a single rose. "Faith Haws." His voice echoed through the arena. He wore a clip-on microphone.

She smiled and brought the rose to her face.

They were both up on the jumbotron, so she waved. And everyone waved back. What a dear town.

Then Decker held out his hand. "Want to ride?"

She looked around her, and everyone was nodding. So she climbed out over the railing and onto the front of his

horse. His arms went around her, and they took off around the arena again. "I'm the guy who is going to get this parade started. Is everyone ready for the rodeo to start?"

The crowd went crazy.

And Faith was loving it all.

"Okay, first I have an important question to ask this beautiful woman I've got in my arms."

Everyone clapped in rhythm, and then got faster and faster until they were clapping like crazy again.

But when they quieted, Decker nuzzled her neck and said, "Faith Haws, one day I'd like to ask you to marry me."

She gasped and brought a hand to her chest.

"But first, I think you need to be my girlfriend. Will you be mine?"

She was sure the crowd made noise and that there were other people around, but after the word *marry*, everything had gone quiet. Marry Decker. There wouldn't be anything in the world better than that. Would that it could be tomorrow.

But his girlfriend? Of course. She'd always been his girlfriend. "Yes!" She kissed his cheek.

And the crowd shouted their approval.

"With that happy news, let the parade begin!"

In a long line, the rodeo participants entered one by one. Faith and Decker led them all.

"You happy?" he whispered in her ear once the microphone had been turned off.

"So happy."

"Me too." His arms tightened around her, and she felt loved and safe and powerful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Decker got dressed in his best church clothes and headed to the hospital. Faith had announced to everyone that she would be turning off the life support for Grandpa. And people were invited to spend his last remaining minutes with him.

It was a generous gift from Faith; everyone would now be able to say goodbye. She had been at the hospital all morning by herself, sitting with him. She'd even taken some selfies to send to Decker.

When he pulled into the parking lot, many more cars were there than usual. And as he made his way in, he began to suspect everyone was up on Grandpa's floor.

When the elevator door opened to a crowd of people lining the hallways, he knew he was correct.

He made his way through as best he could and at last arrived in Grandpa's room, where he found Faith in a packed room.

She waved him in, and people made as much room as possible for him to get by.

Faith stood on one side of Grandpa, and the nurse stood on the other.

Decker wrapped his arms around Faith, and they just stood.

"It's time." She told the nurse. Then she turned to the crowd. "We are here to give Grandpa a chance to go home to God if he wants."

The nodded. Everyone immediately started to wipe tears from their eyes.

"You are more than welcome to come say goodbye to him. I'll stay on this side with Decker. You may all approach him on the other side.

The nurse then pushed some buttons, and one of the machines turned off. But the others that monitored his vitals continued.

Everyone watched.

Faith leaned forward and whispered something in Grandpa's ear, and then his lips moved, and he smiled.

"I love you, Grandpa," she said. "Thank you for the best life."

His smile stayed as his heart rate slowed and was still.

Decker pulled her close and felt the wetness of her tears. She held on to Grandpa's hand with one of her own. And they stood like that for two hours while the people of Willow Creek came to say goodbye.

At last, when the final person left, the nurse closed the door, and they were alone with Grandpa.

"He smiled." Faith turned to Decker. "He smiled."

"That was the coolest experience I've ever had. But, man, I miss him."

"I do too."

They sat together, watching his face. But they knew he was gone.

Then she lifted his sheets, pulled them up over his face, and left the room with Decker close at her side.

The funeral brought everyone together again plus many more.

And after, a smaller group ate together in the front room of the church.

"What a beautiful service." Mrs. Dawson patted Faith's hand. "You are a remarkable woman."

"Oh, thank you. I still can't believe that he's gone." She looked from one to the other of them. "I guess I should be feeling lonely now, being the last of the Willow Creek Haws left on earth. But I don't. I feel so close to you all, I'm surrounded by love." Her eyes teared up again.

"You certainly are. Don't you be worrying about that one minute. You're not alone in any way." Mrs. Dawson nodded.

"I can't thank you enough."

The conversation touched lightly on many things, but focused more on Grandpa than anything else. He was a remarkable man with lots of history.

"And for some reason, even though my expenses will now be less, I feel less guilty about selling."

"It's so hard to let it go, isn't it?" Bailey shook her head. "Willow Creek is something special to all of us."

They started talking about selling their land, and there was only one person to object: Decker.

He didn't say much, but Faith could probably tell that he didn't like it one bit. Listening to everyone talking about

this perk or that benefit to giving up pieces of Willow Creek just made his skin itch.

Then someone talked about Randall. And one of their high school friends smiled. "He's, like, the literal hero of Willow Creek right now. We should have a Randall McKinney day."

And that was the last possible straw.

Faith put her nice cool fingers on his arm, but even that didn't calm his raging reaction. "I..."

Faith stood. "How about we get an order of ice cream while we're in town. How long has it been?"

Everyone agreed and they put in their order, but the table was quiet. Decker couldn't resist saying at least something. "I just wonder what Randall is getting out of this." After digging into the contract, he knew some of the things that Randall might be getting.

They scoffed for the most part. "The guy is probably getting a commission. Of course he is. There's nothing wrong with that," Maverick reminded him. "At least he's local himself. That helps."

"Helps the developer. Who is really looking out for us, that's what someone needs to ask."

They all turned to Decker with only mild interest.

"Looks like that's what I'm doing."

"Great. If you find something shady, let us know. Until then, we're going to keep living with our happy expectation of sudden wealth." The girl who dreamed of Randall McKinney Day seemed ready to defend the guy to the last.

But Decker wasn't about to ignore the new information about mineral rights, and he knew that if his suspicions

were accurate, they might change their tune. "I just think we have a little bit longer until our signing day to figure this out. Might as well research everything."

"It's admirable that you're so attached."

"We all want to honor Dad. We don't want to let it go without making smart contract decisions."

"Selling wouldn't dishonor Dad." Maverick ran a hand through his hair. "It would just be so much less stress on the ranch, on caring for Mama, on everything, if we could sell off that upper land. Honestly, Deck, I don't know why you care so much. You're not even gonna be here."

"What!" Faith gasped and looked at Deck. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not going anywhere." Decker glared at Mav.

"Well, no. He's just had the best offer of his life to go out to New York, something he's been wanting for at least five years. Nothing wrong with that." Maverick looked at everyone. "The better we do outside of Willow Creek, the better Willow Creek does, right? But the point is, Deck, you can't go having such strong opinions when you aren't even going to be here."

Decker glanced quickly at Faith and then stared daggers at Mav before he stood up. "Well, here we go again. The siblings who stick around are the most loyal. They're the ones the Dawsons should listen to most. While the ones who keep the family afloat by going outside to build a name for themselves are discounted. Do you really think that's how this should go?" He nodded to everyone then walked away.

But Faith didn't follow.

Not yet.

She had to let things sink in. And her reaction right now was nowhere near appropriate for what had just happened. Was she hurt? So much. Did she have a right to be? Maybe not.

Sounded like Decker hadn't made a decision about New York yet.

But it also sounded like he really wanted to go.

So many thoughts rushed through her that she didn't know what to do with them all, so she sat very, very still. And didn't do anything.

Hours later, at her house, the place was quiet and, for the first time in a long time, lonely. She decided it was time to box up the stuff from her childhood. So instead of going to bed, she went from room to room and put everything in a box that she really didn't like anymore. She separated herself from her emotional attachment and just put stuff away that felt outdated or that needed to be refreshed. She worked long into the night and finished a surprising number of rooms.

When she fell into bed, she hoped she was too tired to think about Decker going to New York.

Was she sad that he was leaving? Or was she feeling betrayed he didn't tell her sooner? Yes. All of it. Yes.

How could she live without him?

Was he going to ask her to go with him? To New York? And if he did, would she go?

Her thoughts whirled around in her head so late into the night that when the stars dimmed, she finally felt the relief of sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A week went by with only brief conversations between Decker and Faith. She was pleasant enough but always too busy.

When he heard she was spring cleaning the house, he offered to help, but she told him no.

When he heard she was going to take the truck in to get it tuned up, he offered to do it for her, and she told him no.

She wasn't exactly avoiding him, but she was definitely keeping him at a distance.

He knew why, but he didn't know what to do about it.

He'd responded to the offer in New York, telling them he was highly interested, and asking if they could have a conversation. He thought the timing was right for him to go out there, except for Faith.

He didn't really know what she thought about any of it. He'd been waiting for the right moment to bring up moving across the country. And now...well, the fact that he'd said nothing to her made him look like he didn't care.

But the fact of the matter was, he did care. He cared so much it hurt. And he didn't think he could go to New York

unless she went with him. If she would still have him.

Would she have him?

They'd had so little time. And at the same time, they'd had their whole lives.

He closed the refrigerator after staring blankly inside for a full three minutes.

Then he grabbed his keys and ran out to his truck. He was going to have the conversation with Faith he should have had weeks ago.

But when he drove up to her house, Randall was there, sitting on the front porch with a glass of lemonade.

He would have turned around and driven away except they both saw him. He didn't have anything to say to that weasel.

Did he have something he could drop off and run? He searched around his truck. And then he saw her sweatshirt. Perfect.

He stepped out of the truck.

"Hey, I see you're busy. Just wanted to make sure you had this."

She waved to him to come over. And he did, hesitantly.

When he handed her the sweatshirt, their fingers touched, and he felt their usual connection. He was drawn to her, wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her fully and thoroughly. But Randall was over there smirking at him with his lemonade.

"Want some lemonade?" Faith asked.

"Oh, no, thanks. I'm heading on my way. You've got company."

“Oh, well, thank you. Let me walk you back to your truck.”

When they were out of earshot at his truck door, he stepped as close as he dared. “Faith, I’m sorry.”

“Let’s talk about it later, okay?”

“Right. You’re not...are you signing right now?”

She stiffened. “No. I’ll be there with all the other neighbors on signing day.”

“Oh right. Sure. Well then, will I see you...soon?”

“How about on signing day?” She stepped back. “Thanks again for coming by and for the sweatshirt.”

He nodded. “Of course. See you then.” He rocked back and forth in his boots, and when she turned and headed back to her porch, he got back in his truck and drove away, ignoring Randall’s raised hand. See her on signing day?

Had he lost Faith before he ever really won her over? He wished she would talk to him.

But he had some work to do before signing day. If what he suspected was true, it would at least stop her from looking at Randall with lights in her eyes. And it might give everyone in Willow Creek something to think about.

Faith watched Decker drive away with a wrench in her heart. Could they still be together? She hoped so. But how would it work?

Randall stood up from his spot on her porch. “Thanks for the lemonade. It’s the best in all of Willow Creek.”

She laughed, a halfhearted noise. “Hey, thanks, Randall.”

"I appreciate all your support with the land sales. Looks like we have everybody."

"That's great. I think it's time, really."

"Past time."

She nodded. He could celebrate his personal successes all he wanted. Selling still came with some regret. It would for everyone.

"Signing day was a good idea, Randall. I think the town is making a party out of it."

He laughed. "Excellent." He walked down the stairs off the porch. "I guess I'll be seeing you then?"

"Yes, sounds good."

"And Decker?"

She studied him. "What are you asking here, Randall?"

"I'm just... You two seem off, or maybe you've finally decided to tell him to give you some space?"

She shook her head. "Randall..."

"Say no more. None of my business." His smile was open, almost charming even. "If that doesn't work, ever, give me a call. No matter what, I'm there." He leaned in and kissed her cheek and then walked down the path and got in his car.

She shook her head. "Nope. That's not gonna happen."

She lifted her hand to wave goodbye and didn't watch him drive away.

The house was a new place. Most of the knickknacks were gone. A lot of the furniture had been taken to the dump. She lifted one of the paint cans out of the kitchen, opened it with a flat screwdriver, dipped in her brush, and started painting the walls white.

Two hours later, with aching arms, she decided to take a break.

The light in the kitchen was on, which was good since the house was otherwise pretty dark. The sun had gone down. Rotating her shoulders, she itched her chin with her wrist and pushed open the kitchen door.

A delicious smell, beautiful flowers, soft music, and a set table welcomed her in. Decker turned from the oven, apron on, with a smile. "Looked like you could use a good meal and a break."

It was all so perfect, so exactly what she wanted right then, that she couldn't even feel unhappy that he'd shown up uninvited. He was her best friend. That's what best friends did. She shook her head. Dating your best friend was complicated like that. And wonderful like that. She stepped into the room. "This is exactly what I wanted."

The relief on his face warmed her heart. "Good, 'cause I was prepared to walk out that back door as soon as I took this out of the oven." He pointed to his mittened hand.

She shook her head. "No, stay. I could use the company."

"Good, 'cause this is my favorite meal."

"Just what smells so good?"

"I made my mama's shepherd's pie."

"Wow, that's impressive, Deck."

"She helped me."

"Of course. Still impressive though."

He pulled it out then sliced the French bread, poured their drinks, and scooped up food on their plates. "Dinner is served."

She sat next to him at her kitchen table. "The place is pretty empty now."

"I think it looks good."

"Me too."

"Should we pray?"

She took his hand and smiled, bowing her head.

"Lord, we thank thee for this meal. And for Mama. And for Grandpa. And we thank thee for Faith and for our friendship and...love. Please bless Faith. Bless our choices. Watch over Willow Creek."

As he prayed, she remembered what an honorable man he was, how deep down to the core of Decker and all the way from there to the surface, was a good, God-loving man who was doing his best.

And some of her new fear and distrust started to soften.

When he was finished, she squeezed his hand. "Amen."

They talked about everything and nothing, the things two best friends always talked about. The weather, the crops, the people they loved, the news, the birds she saw while mowing, their horses, everything except what was most difficult.

Then he said, "I miss Grandpa, but I also keep remembering he's in a really great place with Grandma, and he can talk and walk, and it's just harder to feel sad for him."

She nodded. But before she could agree or disagree, he continued, "But it makes me sad for you. Some of this right here is to stick myself back in your face. You're not alone. Even when you want to be. You're not. That's what family is. And I want to be family. I'm not sure if I lost the chance to

be your closest family, the man who would be at your side forever. But even if that's gone, I'm still Decker and you're still Faith. And we know how to be friends through it all." He raised his right hand. "Best friends to the end."

He studied her face. She wasn't sure if he was looking for some kind of answer from her or not. But she suddenly just wanted to talk it out. "Alright. Let's hear what you have to say about New York."

He exhaled in relief. "Faith, it's been killing me that I haven't been able to talk to you about this."

"Why didn't you?"

"'Cause all of a sudden you were not just my best friend Faith. You were someone I was trying to love, to date, to... marry." His gaze bore into hers with an intensity that burned inside her. But she tried really hard not to react. She needed to keep her wits about her, needed to understand.

She nodded.

"And so it just felt a little soon to come at you with a potential move and a petition that you come with me, 'cause the only way that would work would be as my wife."

She nodded again. "And so you didn't want to bring it up at all until you knew you could propose?"

"Hearing you say it like that makes it sound silly, but yes. I didn't want to spring this whole thing on you in the middle of Grandpa and selling and trying to convince you to love me back. I didn't want to rush us. I wanted us to have a nice, slow, get-to-know-you relationship. But..." He shrugged. "I guess we're past that. So if you want to tell me

to back off or slow down, I will. But that's what is going on in my head."

"And New York?"

"Oh right. Your original question. I've been wanting to work at this particular firm since I graduated from college."

"I know. I helped you pick them out."

"Oh, that's right, you did. In fact, you honestly might be the reason I like them." He laughed. "I'd forgotten about that. See what kind of influence you have on me."

She laughed. "So, what did they say?"

"They sent me an email out of the blue and asked if I would consider working for them. It's a sweet deal."

"Wow. And you want to take it?"

"I do. And I don't."

"Okay. Tell me about it."

"I would go in a second if I knew you were going to be there."

And then Faith felt a bit better. He was considering a career move, or rather, he was considering not taking a job he'd wanted forever, because of her. That said she was important to him. "And if I'm not?"

"Then I'm still trying to figure that out."

"And Willow Creek?"

"I just don't think Willow Creek needs me anymore. Maverick will have the whole financial stuff worked out soon, and I can do the Dawson books from New York. You are literally the only thing keeping me here."

Everything he was saying was what she'd wanted to hear from him her whole life. And a part of her wanted to jump into his arms in happiness. But she had to notice that, really,

she was conflicted. Leave Willow Creek? Decker had been her dream her whole life, but that dream had always included Willow Creek.

New York City?

She just didn't know. She'd never considered leaving.

"I know this is a lot. You don't need to say anything at all, but I'm glad I told you."

"You're right. It's sort of a difficult thing to hear. I don't know if I'm ready to know the answers to our future. But I'm glad you told me." She reached for his hand. "I'm happy for you. You've wanted this very thing for a long time. What a blessing."

"It was so crazy to get this email from them. I mean, they are going to take me on with a third-year salary as if I'd been there this whole time."

"What! That's amazing. They must really like you."

"They do. I've consulted for them a few times. I don't know. But I'm grateful. More than anything, I'm grateful they would make such an offer."

"When do you have to tell them?"

"I don't know. I have a phone call with them in a week."

"Oh good. They can answer all our questions." She laughed. "Your questions."

"No, *our* questions. I like the sound of that much better. And yes, I can ask them anything you want."

She grinned. "Well. I know this still doesn't have anything to do with me, but you might want to ask about housing, moving costs, best places to live." She couldn't help herself. "And who knows how long you'll stay. Do they

have good retirement? What's the future partner path with them."

His smile just kept growing as he started typing in his phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Just taking notes. I don't want to forget this stuff."

"Ha. You're nice, Deck. I'm happy for you. A part of me thinks this could be real great. But it's just not something I've ever wanted to do."

"I know. Take whatever time you need."

"Thank you."

They talked late into the night, shifting back to the kinds of things best friends talk about. And then when it was really too late to stay a moment longer, he stood. "Thank you for not kicking me out."

"Thank you for dinner. I'm really impressed with this."

"I'll leave it here for leftovers."

"Thanks. It's no fun to cook for one."

"You should just come on over to ours. We have dinner on every night. Mama even hires a cook now."

"She's a smart lady."

The kiss he gave her was short but intense, and she clung to him a little desperately for a moment. But then he stepped away and walked out the back door. "I'll see you at the signing."

She left her hand up, waving goodbye, long after he'd gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The morning of signing day started early, and Decker was finally ready. He had done his research. He had his proof. He had a plan. But he felt unsettled. Was it not a good thing to save his town? Why was he feeling dissatisfied?

He called Faith. It only rang once. "Hey." She sounded breathless.

"What are you doing now?"

"The attic. I got everything out of there. Man, we have stuff from my parents' childhood."

"What! I bet we do too, actually. I wonder if anyone has ever cleaned out our attic."

"I'll have to go through this stuff. It's gonna be a good journey."

"I'm proud of you. You're on fire, woman. Is there anywhere else in your house that needs an overhaul?"

"Not really. I'm still painting. And then I might give away more furniture. But this is great. It feels good. I think the house was holding me back."

He nodded. "I like that. Sometimes we have to take drastic measures to step away from situations that hold us

back, is that what you're saying?"

"Maybe." Her tone was cheerful, teasing. "Or to follow our dreams, right?"

"Right. That's what I'm thinking." He was more excited to tell Faith his findings than anyone, but he had one more call to receive this morning, one more verification, before he told a single soul. "So, are you free after signing day?"

"Yes, always."

"Save the rest of the day for me."

"Bold."

"I've got nothing but boldness left, Squirt."

She laughed in surprise; he loved that laugh. "You haven't called me squirt in...forever."

"Well, it's high time then, don't you think?"

"Yes, I used to hate it. But now? Now it's fun."

"You just hated it 'cause it was the year I finally grew taller than you."

She sighed dramatically. "That was a terrible year. You thought you were so cool. You kept trying to boss me around."

"No way. I will never ever be the boss of you, Squirt."

He could hear the smile in her voice. Her energy was back as well. He hoped, no, he prayed today would be a good day.

"With that thought, I'll see you in an hour."

"You got it."

Once they hung up, Decker gathered all his research, his contracts, and his thoughts. Everyone was going over there in separate cars from the Dawson household. Today was

going to be a big day. He wanted everything to go well. Most of all, he wanted Faith to be happy.

He took his time getting there. He wanted everyone to be in the room, seated when he arrived. And it would be perfect if Randall was up in front talking. He was gonna catch that weasel in the act.

When he pulled in, the parking lot was full. He walked through the large double doors, and into the main hall. Voices sounded from their largest multipurpose room, and he followed them with a smile. He loved these people. Willow Creek was family.

Standing in the doorway, he watched Judy from the burger place, Mabel, and Benson from the dump. He laughed because he was surrounded by smiling people. His family was there. Even Mrs. Walton was there. People he didn't usually see had come out. It was a regular town reunion. He stood taller and opened the door.

Randall stopped mid-sentence, and his eyes widened when he saw Decker, but then he continued. "And so it is my great pleasure to provide pens, waters, and plenty of time for you to sign and hand in your contracts. This is one of the greatest accomplishments of my life, to be able to help my neighbors here in Willow Creek have such a life-changing financial boon and to help Willow Creek grow to meet its potential.

"Before we move forward, do we have any questions?"

"We're good, Randall! Thank you for all this!"

"Yeah, hand me my pen!"

People called out this quip or that, congratulating Randall. Everyone seemed in a cheerful mood.

“No questions?”

Decker started to walk to the front of the room. He waved to everyone and smiled at Mama before he stood at the front next to Randall.

“Do you have a question, Decker?”

“Yes, I do.”

A few in the crowd groaned. But for the most part his friends and neighbors looked openly curious.

Decker rested his briefcase on the table at the front. “Now, I know we are all here ready to sign. But how many of you would never sign if there was another way?”

Everyone looked a little confused.

“What I’m asking is, if I were to present a way for you to keep your land and receive money on it, would you be interested?”

“Of course, Decker, son, but we’ve been through all this. Let’s just get ‘er done.” His old mathematics teacher made him smile.

Then Doug the barber waved his hand. “No, no, hold on. Our Decker has news.”

The rest of them turned to look at him with better attention.

“Doug, you’re right. I do have news.”

Faith frowned just a little.

“My question is this. Randall, what can you tell us about our mineral rights?”

Everyone in the room went quiet, and all eyes turned to Randall.

And much to Decker’s satisfaction, the man’s face had gone white. “Uh, mineral rights are somewhat of an

outdated concept..." His voice trailed off, and Decker held up his paperwork. "You might want to level with us."

He held his hand out to Decker. "Sounds like you have something to say, why don't you just say it?"

"So, on each of your contracts, is there a mineral rights clause? 'Cause mine sure doesn't have one. And in the state of Texas, if it's not specified, then the mineral rights go to the buyer."

"What are mineral rights?" someone called out.

"Randall?"

But the man was now fuming and leaned back against his desk in silence.

"Typically a landowner here owns their property all the way to the center of the earth, including all minerals that might be found there, oil, gas, gold, if there was any."

People all over the room started talking.

"But." Decker held up his hand, and they quieted.

"But, if the seller wishes to keep the mineral rights, they must be listed specifically in the contract. And they aren't in yours, right?"

"Not in mine!"

Randall shook his head. "It's standard practice to sell the rights when you sell the land. No one wants oil drilling machinery on their property put there by past owners."

"Except, Randall, there's more to the story, isn't there?"

He crossed his arms, apparently silent again.

"The developer has no use for the rights. And from what I heard, they would have left the rights in the hands of the original owners, until Randall intervened. So now those

rights are going to be signed over to none other than Randall McKinney, himself.”

The noise in the room escalated.

“He has already talked to Staar Natural Gas who are coming out to survey the properties and give estimates on shale drilling.”

The noise was almost too loud to be heard over.

“But the good news is that the predicted income of this gas and the oil that is also purported to be here in our land, is more, much more, than any of us would make on the sale of the land.”

“How do you know?” Mr. Hansen called out.

“I have all the paperwork right here. I didn’t want to tell anyone until I was sure.” He smiled. “And so now, you can still sell if you like, but I would recommend a new contract in which you keep the mineral rights. But you don’t have to sign at all. We can work with Staar Natural Gas ourselves, or anyone we choose, and have enough to stay right where we are for a long time.”

The people in the room talked quietly with each other. And Decker felt a great peace about where things stood.

Randall came over to stand in front of him. “You will regret this!”

“They should have been told.”

He opened his mouth and then closed it again. He didn’t look like he would agree with Decker any time soon, but at least he wasn’t going to continue to argue the point.

Everyone seemed a bit undecided, which Decker found curious. And then Faith came forward to stand beside him. “I have something to say.”

People quieted and all eyes turned to her.

“I’ve been giving this sale a lot of thought. And hearing I don’t really have to sell is sort of upsetting something I had already talked myself into thinking would be a good thing. And I’m not saying it’s not a good thing. I think selling or not selling can both be good for Willow Creek. But during all this, I’ve been noticing something really important.”

She took a deep breath. “I think I’m going to sell anyway and keep my mineral rights.” She turned to Randall. He just nodded in return.

“But the reason I’m doing it now is not for the money. It’s because I don’t think we should keep Willow Creek all to ourselves. There is plenty of land here, there is plenty of room. And if we sell, then more people can experience some of the Willow Creek magic. More people will shop in our stores. More people will get their hair cut. We can bring in fun things to do, and more people will enjoy them. We can all still live here. And we can share with more people. We will keep the important vibe and we will still have each other. But honestly, we will be much more successful and happy because we shared.”

She rocked back and forth from her heels to her toes. “And I know that maybe the Dawsons might prefer to look out their east side at all our pasture land and the hills behind, but if they look out there and see some more neighbors, that can be good too. And they’ll have friends for our kids. And more people to teach in our schools, and it will be a vibrant and growing place instead of the opposite.” She smiled. “You can do what you want, of course, thanks to Decker who found us all a solution.” She came to stand

beside him and took his hand. Under her breath and through her smile, she said, "We have got to work on your communication skills."

He sighed. "Am I forgiven?"

"Of course. You saved the town." She smiled.

Everyone agreed to sleep on it and return the next day to sign Randall's new and improved contracts. And at long last, he and Faith were left alone, standing in front of his truck. "Can I take you for a drive?"

"Yeah, where are we going?"

"That's going to be a surprise, little lady."

"Squirt, little lady? What else you got?"

"Oh you know me. I used to call you a different thing every month." He laughed. "But most of all, I love your name. Faith. Do you know how often your name has helped me be strong?"

She shook her head.

"All the time. Especially during this whole signing problem, through the hospitalization of your grandpa, when I thought I lost you, when I didn't know what to do about New York. Through all of that, I would often think of you, and your name would come to me, reminding me who I can rely on, who has me in His hands." Decker really wanted her to understand this. "You are everything to me, Faith."

She snuggled close to him on the truck bench. And he drove them to the overlook.

She laughed when they parked. "We going to make-out point?"

"No."

"Dang. I always wanted you to take me to make-out point."

"Well, then that can be arranged. I've always wanted to make out with you."

"What!"

"I did! I thought it was just crazy boy hormones and it would ruin our friendship, but I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to kiss those lips."

"That's just crazy, Deck. Crazy." She looked kind of like she wanted to throttle him. He laughed. "Hold on, better late than never." He kissed her lips. "Right?"

"We'll see."

Then he laughed even harder. "You're something, Faithy Haws, one tiny, wonderful something."

She nodded.

He circled around the truck and grabbed a couple blankets and his basket and then helped her up into the bed of the truck. They faced away from the overlook and lay down, looking up into the sky. "I wanted to show you something."

She rested her head on his shoulder and took his hand in hers. "This is really something."

"See all those stars? You can't see that many down in town, or even on my ranch because we have those lights installed. But look now. There are more than I could ever count."

"I love this view." She sighed.

"You happy?"

"Oh yeah, Deck. I didn't know I could ever be this happy. Thank you for what you did today."

"You're welcome. I did it for us all." He was quiet for a moment. "I liked what you said. I've been selfish. We can share what we have, sell, and help Willow Creek be a vibrant growing town."

"That's the spirit."

"But see the Dippers?"

"Yep."

"See the North Star?"

"Yep."

"How do you know how to find the North Star?"

She laughed. "Decker, everyone knows. You follow the two stars in the Little Dipper and go out..."

"Okay, yeah, you're right. Well, if you go out past the North Star, there's a cluster with one bright star and a cloudy, hazy mass, do you see it?"

She looked for a second and then nodded. "It's faint?"

"Yes. Sometimes if you look slightly to the left of it you can see it better."

"Okay, yeah, I see it. What is it?"

"They found a new star in there. I just thought we should name it. It's just further out from north, and it's constant. It's been around a long time. And I thought it would be a good reminder of a theme I've noticed with us lately."

She cleared her throat.

"Okay, well, I started showing you that I care."

She nodded up against him. "Right."

"I just think there have been so many times when I wasn't sure what to do or things seemed difficult, and then something would happen and I would know it had to have been from God, you know?"

"His hand is stretched out still."

"Exactly. Have you noticed?"

"All the time. Once I started paying attention to all the ways God was in my life, I saw Him everywhere. I mean, life has not been perfect by any stretch, but there are so many times I've seen God helping."

"Right. So in my mind that star cluster can always help remind us of that. Life will be tough. We might not always have the answers. We might have to move forward in the dark. But we can remember that through all that His hand is stretched out still. And we can follow what we already know to do and wait to learn what more is out there for us."

"I love that." She was quiet for a long time. "And when we can't see it, we will still know it's there. The North Star can remind us."

"Exactly what I was thinking."

He sat up and dug in his basket. "I brought us some snacks and drinks."

They munched on Mama's muffins and drank her hot cocoa while staring out over the Milky Way, which stretched out above them. "That's really something."

Then he turned on his music and tugged her to her feet, and they danced. The music played and they danced as long as they wanted to, song after song, slow, fast, medium tempos. And they loved it all until he lifted her into his arms, climbed down to the dirt, and got down on one knee. "Faith Haws, I love you. I have loved you my whole life. And I will be loving you forever. I'm as constant as that star in the sky. Will you marry me?"

She broke down into tears. But she smiled joy down into his face, so much so that he could only laugh with happiness.

“Yes, Decker Dawson. This is right where I have wanted to be my whole life. Yes, I’ll marry you.” She tugged him back up. And then he pulled her into his arms, tasting once again those lips he’d wished to kiss for so many years.

Her mouth was soft, welcoming, and smelled of strawberries. He kissed her over and over, pulling her as close as he could, mumbling against her mouth, “I love you.”

During a beautiful pause, she smiled up into his face. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER ONE, COMING HOME TO MAVERICK

Maverick dipped his hat lower against the hot Texas sun. A man's hat could hide a lot of things, unfortunately not everything. His forearms flexed against the rough wood of the split-rail fence, as he stretched his fingers open and closed. His mind was so far away he hardly noticed Colton or the new horse in the small corral used for training horses. This new colt was fighting every effort to break him, and Maverick didn't blame him one bit. He knew his thoughts were ridiculous, but he suddenly wanted that horse on the run, leaping over the fence and taking off across the pasture. Their new trainer was having a devil of a time with the Spawn of Satan, and Maverick wanted to see who would break first—Colton, the trainer, or Spawn, his horse. His bets were on Colton. The horse had passion, fire, and a strong will, exactly what Maverick needed in himself right now.

The tension in the horse's flank, his flared nostrils, and the dance of trainer and horse were familiar, comforting. Maverick imagined himself out there, facing the whip, as he

tried to distract himself from the shattering news of a just a few hours ago.

Their property, which stretched for miles in every direction, had always felt like a safe haven. He'd felt God in those hills countless times. But even the stark beauty of the rugged, rocky terrain and rolling green hills couldn't protect him from the news that had sent him out riding the fence line, checking their bales of hay, inspecting the tractors in the back barn, and then finally here to the horse paddock. He'd tried to send some prayers up to Heaven on the way, but at least that afternoon, God was being strangely silent.

His phone rang. "Yeah."

"Where are you?" Dylan's gruff voice made him smile.

"You worried about me?"

"I'm more worried about the paperwork I gotta send to the accountant."

Maverick didn't believe that for a second. "Colton needed some support."

The quiet on the line said more than any response could have. Maverick was hiding. They all knew it.

Maverick grunted. "And I needed some space."

"So you heard."

"How could I not hear when no one can stop talking about it?"

"You coming in for lunch?"

The whole family gathered for lunch every day. It was more like a late breakfast, but it was a family rule that they show up. And for the first time in a long time, Maverick wished he could avoid them, at least for a little while longer.

The last time had been when they'd laid their father to rest in the family plot on the northwest corner of their property. His father had been his hero; he'd raised four boys into men, created a successful thriving ranch, and left the Dawson Ranch legacy to Maverick.

And now Maverick's fiancée had returned after six years, with no explanation, no effort to reach out. She just showed back up in their hometown. And he found himself needing some solitude.

Spawn kicked up his back legs and leapt around the paddock, trying to rid himself of the newly placed saddle. Maverick envied the horse. When would it ever be acceptable for Maverick to kick up his heels and buck off whatever he didn't want to deal with?

But he knew he'd best be heading back to the kitchen, or he'd suffer the wrath of Mama. And no one with any sense or brains messed with his mama. He grinned. They owed everything to the strength of that very short woman. "I'll be there."

He heard a grunt of approval or relief or something—who knew what Dylan's grunts meant—and then he hung up the phone. His gaze traveled over the surrounding hills, the patchwork green and tan of the hay they put out every year to feed the livestock. In a couple months, they'd be bringing in the cows to sell at auction. They'd harvest their crops and nestle in for the winter months. The guys would start in on the rodeo circuit, Mama would participate in the local craft shows and fairs, and he'd take a break.

He hopped on the ATV, waved good luck to Colton, who was being controlled by the young horse, and then took the

longest path back to the house.

He offered a prayer as he crested the ridge overlooking his family's homestead. "Thank you Lord for all the goodness in our lives, for my brothers and my Mother." He paused, expecting a rush of satisfaction. They'd built something special. The Dawson brothers were known for their cattle, their horses, and their rodeo championships. His father would be proud. They were all fine, honorable men. And according to Dad, that's what mattered. "I don't care what career you choose," he used to say, "but be honest, hardworking, and competent at whatever it is."

Except in Maverick's case, Dad did care what he became. Maverick was the new head of the Dawson Ranch, the new head of the family, as prescribed in the will his father left. Only, Maverick felt like half the man his father had been. He turned the ATV back down the path. His other brothers were pulling up to the house. Time for lunch. He finished his prayer. "I should be grateful, and I am. Help me to show it today even though I've had some hard news." He grit his teeth, knowing he should say the next words, but finding it difficult. "And please bless Bailey. She must have gone through an awful lot. Amen."

A loud, musical horn echoed across the valley, and he shook his head. Nash. Sounded like his youngest brother was in high form. His Jeep spun out in the gravel at the start of the long drive, and then he slowed to a crawl as he approached the house. Maverick nodded to himself. Nash knew better than to throw dust all over Mama's flowers. Mama was continually reminding them that someday they'd

have grandkids running around the front yard and they'd all have to be careful.

Grandkids. Maverick had stopped counting how old his kids would have been if he and Bailey had actually been married. They could have had two by then. Or maybe they would have had a long honeymoon relationship with no children. He'd have liked that just as well.

"Stop," he told himself again. Bailey's return to Willow Creek had brought back emotions he thought he'd buried years ago. But pieces of his heart still longed for her and felt as raw as the day she left. Before he could shut out the memory, the view of the long aisle at the church filled his mind—the pews decorated with ribbons and flowers, the floor sprinkled with flower petals. Everyone they knew and loved smiling up at him, his mother's eyes full of tears, and his father's full of pride. He swallowed the lump in his throat before it could turn into anything that would make his eyes red when he walked into lunch with his family.

He drove down the side of the hill and parked his ATV in the garage, wiping off the trail dust and placing the keys on the hook. Then he went through the workroom, tidying the few items out of place. He brushed the dust off himself again, wiped his face, and ran a hand through his hair. His hat went on a hook—no hats at the dinner table. He was about to open the door into the house when his mama's voice stopped him.

"We love you, son. We'll support you in whatever you want to do."

He turned to face her. Her hair was still damp from her shower, the soft curls framing her face. She stood near the

entry into the house, watching him, seeing through his stoic front. Mama was a dear, but she had no notion of the private emotions of a man's heart.

"What I want to do?"

Her eyes were kind with a hint of sorrow, and he hated that he was the cause. She handed him some napkins to bring in from the storage room and a bin for extra dishes.

He'd endlessly analyzed the events of his wedding day and he and Bailey's relationship, and still he couldn't imagine how he could have acted differently. And he didn't know what more he could do now. You can't prepare to be blindsided. And he knew his mama had been hurt in her own way. She'd given her heart to Bailey and had, in some ways, lost a daughter when the woman had left.

Mama nodded. "Yes. We're with you whatever you decide to do—or not do."

He wrapped an arm around her. "I don't know what I want to do. But I do know I love you, Mama. Let's go have some of Cook's food."

She laughed. "The best thing you ever did was hire a cooking staff."

"I see no reason why you have to be the one to make your signature hotcakes."

"Sometimes I go make sure they've got it right," she said with a smile.

"I have no doubt. And they're delicious every time."

She stood on tiptoe. He dipped his head so she could kiss his cheek and give it a pat. "You're a good man, Maverick. You deserve to be happy."

"I am, Mama. What more could a dusty cowpoke need?"

She wiped her hands on the front of her apron and then took it off. She placed it on a hook, and together they entered the house and made their way into the large dining room. Maverick stood in the doorway. All three of his brothers were in town, and each of them sat at the table. Heaping piles of pancakes waited on platters down the center of the table. Almost as much bacon, eggs, toast, and thick slices of ham made his stomach grumble. Instantly, his mood lifted.

“Brothers.” He nodded. No one heard him.

Nash stood from his chair. “You can’t even go there. If I’m riding Spice, no one’s gonna beat me. Not you, not Tommy, no one.”

“You’re a mess, Nash.”

“Take a look in the mirror before you go making comments, Decker. When’s the last time you brought home a first place?”

Mama cleared her throat and nodded toward the sign on the wall behind her. “Dawson happiness starts at home.”

The brothers grumbled but closed their mouths.

Mama treated this room as the center of their family. She kept their portraits in there, their senior pictures from high school. The wall also held two phrases the family lived by. “If you’re unhappy, get to work” was displayed in large sweeping letters on the opposite wall from the one Mama had just quoted. The brothers stood when Mama entered. She sat at the head of the huge, thick wood table that dominated the room. Then her eyes turned to Maverick, alerting his brothers to his presence.

“Hey, Maverick! How’s the colt?” Dylan asked. He was the one who took care of the horses, including their training and breeding.

Maverick felt their eyes on him as he moved to sit at the other end of the table. “He lives up to his name. Good test run for Colton, though you’re gonna have to save him. Maybe sooner than later.”

Dylan nodded. “He’ll come around. They both will. Colton came highly recommended. He has a way with horses like no one I’ve ever seen.”

Maverick was grateful they were talking business. “Nash, I heard your new horn.”

“Isn’t it awesome!” he said, his grin wide. “I’m taking the Jeep with me when the circuit starts.”

“You’re going this year?” Mama poured herself some water.

Everyone looked at their mother as Nash nodded. “Of course, I’m going. You said if I finished out two years helping on the ranch, I could spend the next doing the rodeo circuit.”

Mama didn’t answer. And she avoided Maverick’s gaze. If no one else stayed, Maverick was the one who stayed. And so far, he’d been happy with that. He didn’t have a problem with taking over for his father; he’d always known some day he would; he’d just thought it would be later. There’s nothing else he would rather be doing anyway, he told himself.

Decker, Dylan’s twin, usually disagreed with everything Nash said on principle. But he sat quietly, which Maverick found suspicious.

“What are the predictions on the team this year?”

Mama held up a hand. “Wait. Before we get into all that, let’s pray.”

Everyone waited for Mama to say a few words. “You know I’m proud of you boys. We miss those not with us, your father most of all, but I know he’d be even more proud of every one of you. Thank you for what you give to the ranch. It’s a huge endeavor. Your father gave everything he had to this ranch, knowing it would help take care of each of us for as long as we took care of it.” Her eyes traveled to each man at the table, and Maverick knew she desperately needed the ranch. He supposed he did too. It was the only thing they had left of their father. If the ranch lived, their father did too. Mama closed her eyes. They held hands around the table and bowed heads.

“Dear Lord bless this family. Bless this land. Bless the women my boys are going to one day marry. And today especially bless Maverick. We’re grateful for every thing in our lives that you placed there in such a perfect way, the hard times and the easy. Amen.”

They all echoed, “Amen.”

Nash raised his fork. “Let’s eat!”

Mama nodded. “Let’s eat.”

Everyone dug in. Maverick slapped away Decker’s hand as he reached for the same slice of ham. “Wait your turn.”

Nash passed him a dripping, sticky syrup pitcher.

“Hey now, whoa. Go wipe that off,” Maverick said.

“Why me?”

Decker snorted. “‘Cause you’re the one who drizzled syrup all over the handle.”

Nash frowned but got up from the table to wipe the sticky drips of syrup off the handle. The Dawsons had no patience for anything sticky.

They'd almost finished the meal when Decker put down his napkin and looked directly at Maverick. "So, what are you gonna do about Bailey?"

Everyone went silent, and the air thickened with expectation. His mother avoided his eyes, but all three pairs of his brother's eyes waited for his response.

"I don't know that there is anything to do."

"What if she comes walking back in, thinking there's still a chance over here?" Decker's eyes flashed with anger.

"I don't think there's any chance of that. She hasn't said a word to me."

Everyone seemed to be waiting for him to say something else about it. So finally, he sat back in his chair. "I don't know, all right. I had no idea she was coming. I don't know why she left. I don't know what she's been doing except what everyone else knows." He'd stopped checking social media years ago. "So I don't know what to tell you. Will I see her again? I imagine I'll run into her the next time I have to go into town." He tried to keep the pain off his face, but it was just too hard to hide. "I'm not gonna pretend I'm okay with it, but I don't know what else to do except move forward as though we are people that barely know one another."

"We could shun her." Nash twirled his fork. "You know, like outright avoid her, refuse to talk to her. If you asked the town, they'd support you. She hurt them when she left, too." He replaced his fork. "Not as much as you, but they

might not want to take her back in with open arms, especially if we say we aren't ready."

Maverick held up his hands. "I don't want us to say or do anything. If we see her, we're polite. If we don't, that's fine too." A part of him wanted to see her right away and get it over with. But the other part wanted to go on a long vacation and hope she left before he came back.

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